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**Netflix Jams with
Arlo the Alligator Boy**

Annie Awards: A Sneak Peek

Rising Stars of Animation



The Mitchells vs. the Machines Puts the Fun Back in Dysfunction

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**The Dysfunctional
Fun of Mitchells
vs the Machines**

**Annie Awards:
A Sneak Peek**

**Rising Stars of
Animation**



**A Refreshing Bite of
Crocodile Rock:
Netflix Jams with Arlo
the Alligator Boy**

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We ❤️
Car
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Cover B: *Arlo the Alligator Boy* is ready to conquer the world on Netflix.

MIPTV Cover: Canada's *Atomic Cartoons* prepares for a very productive year.



One of our favorite annual features here at the magazine is our Rising Stars of Animation spotlight, in which we focus on a group of brilliant women and men who have big projects coming up in the near future. Not only did we have a higher number of these talented people to profile this year, we decided to put together a video highlighting these 16 cool individuals as they tell us a little about their career and offer tips to future stars. I am sure you will enjoy watching our group of super-achievers, so make sure you visit our website this month (www.animationmagazine.net) to enjoy this fun video. A big thanks to our events director Kim Derevlany for producing this piece for us.

One word that we keep hearing every day from everyone we talk to in the animation community is "optimism." As more people get vaccinated each day, everyone seems to be ready to put the gloom and doom of the COVID months behind them. One piece of good news that we're glad to share with you is that we are hoping to have our annual World Animation & VFX Summit in person, Nov. 7-10. We'll have more news for you as we firm up the location and guest list for this unique event and can't wait to see all of you back in Los Angeles for this fun confab.

This month, we have two beautifully crafted and original animated features gracing our special covers. We are so happy that director Mike Rianda's much-anticipated movie *The Mitchells vs. the Machines* (formerly known as *Connected*) will finally make its debut on Netflix this month. We've been following this highly creative, fun and charming movie for a few years now, and were saddened when it's theatrical release kept getting bounced around due to the pandemic. Hope we can all see it on the big screen at some point in the near future.



The Mitchells vs. the Machines

The second cover feature of the month is Ryan Crego's super-fun musical movie *Arlo the Alligator Boy*, which also debuts on Netflix in April. I definitely recommend Tom McLean's in-depth look at the making of this movie (which will also lead to an animated series). Crego and his team have created a really snappy and delightful world, populated with unforgettable, original characters. So, make sure you put both movies on your must-see list in April!

We have lots of other fun features prepared for you this month: You can catch up with the team at Canada's go-to animation studio Atomic Cartoons, which has lots of interesting projects in the works. We've been writing about this innovative company for over two decades now, and I'm sure you will enjoy finding out about their upcoming toons and all the colorful ingredients that go into keeping Atomic on the list of our favorite studios around the world.

Also, don't forget two of the biggest awards shows of the year are taking place this month! By now, you should have seen all the big Academy and Annie Award contenders in the animation and VFX categories. We can't wait to see what the organizers of these big kudos fests have planned for this very unusual, virtual year. We know one thing: Like everything else that we've witnessed in the past 12 months, they will be different than what we have seen before. Hey, maybe they'll even be better. Hope springs eternal!

Ramin Zahed
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QUOTE OF THE MONTH



"I'm French Canadian, and like most francophones around the world, I grew up with Asterix ... If you'd told the eight-year-old me that one day I'd help bring these characters to life, I wouldn't have believed you!"

— Netflix director of original animation Dominique Bazay on the streamer's upcoming show *The Adventures of Asterix*.

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Stuff We Love

Earwig and the Witch

Goro Miyazaki's children's book adaptation is a magical and curious entry into 3D CGI for Studio Ghibli. Richard E. Grant, Kacey Musgraves, Dan Stevens and Taylor Paige Henderson bring Diana Wynne Jones' characters to life in this



tale of a headstrong British orphan who finds herself the ward of a selfish witch, and sets out to uncover the mysteries of her magical new home. Release includes feature-length storyboards, Japanese cast interviews and making-of featurette. Fans who purchase the Limited Edition SteelBook through the GKIDS Store get an exclusive cotton tote bag while supplies last! [Shout! Factory, \$20 DVD / \$27 BD / \$33 SB]

Thundarr the Barbarian and Josie & The Pussycats in Outer Space

Two walks down retro toon lane arrive on Blu-ray this month from Warner Archive in complete series collections! Running nearly eight hours on three discs, Ruby-Spears' *Thundarr* (1980; 21 eps.) chronicles the adventures of the barbarian hero, Ookla the Mok and sorceress Princess Ariel through a savage future Earth rife with wizards, mutants and robots, reborn from the ashes of a cosmic cataclysm. [\$25, April 6]



If upbeat teen astronauts are more your jam, Hanna-Barbera's sci-fi reconceptualization of *Josie* (1972; 16 eps.) – developed by Joe Ruby & Ken Spears – hits all the right notes. After Alexandra accidentally launches our pop stars into outer space, the gang travels the galaxy searching for the way back to Earth, encountering cat people, space pirates, galactic dictators and more robots across two out-of-this-world discs. [\$25, April 13]



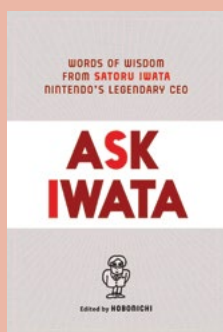
Marvel Comics: The Variant Covers

Feast your eyes on some of the most sought-after comic art in the world in this 200+ page hardcover from veteran Marvel chronicler John Rhet Thomas. The collection showcases more than 400 of the most gorgeous, delightful and humorous takes on iconic characters like Spider-Man, Black Panther and the X-Men produced in the variant cover's 35-year history, complemented by interviews with leading comics artists and industry experts. And of course, the book features an original, ultimate Marvel mash-up cover by illustrator Mike Del Mundo. [Insight Editions, \$45]



Ask Iwata: Words of Wisdom from Satoru Iwata, Nintendo's Legendary CEO

This motivational tome delivers sage advice from the analytical yet imaginative mind of the global gaming icon, who led the production of innovative platforms and smash hits like the DS, Wii, Switch and *Pokémon GO*. Translated by Sam Bett, the programmer



turned industry leader's words are pulled from the "Iwata Asks" interviews with key Nintendo contributors, such as Shigeru Miyamoto (*Mario*).

"On my business card, I am a corporate president. In my mind, I am a game developer. But in my heart, I am a gamer." – Satoru Iwata (1959-2015). [VIZ Media, \$30 | April 13]

Wind Peaks

Citing *Hilda* and *Gravity Falls* as artistic inspirations, the team at Actoon Studio (Brazil) has crafted a hidden object game that follows five scouts through a mysterious wood on the trail of a treasure map. Find-and-click your way through 10 episodes as you solve puzzles and enjoy the 2D scenery. Who doesn't need a li'l brainca-tion right now? [Nintendo Switch / Steam PC, \$15]



NECA Gargoyles Ultimate Goliath

Revel in '90s goth toon nostalgia with this finely chiseled, fully articulated 8" action figure, complete with interchangeable heads, hands and accessories (including a jalapeno). The first in a six-figure collection, Goliath ships in July. [thecastore.com] ♦

May Animation Planner

3 PBS KIDS continues Fred Rogers' legacy with **Donkey Hodie**, a new puppet series premiering today.



ITFS takes the Stuttgart animation celebration global with its first hybrid event, running online May 3-16 and on-site May 4-9. Meanwhile, the **FMX Conference** gets into the nitty gritty of CG, VFX & gaming May 4-7. [itfs.de | fmx.de]

4 **The Bad Batch** expands the Disney+ *Star Wars* universe as it follows a gang of mutated clone troopers on dangerous mercenary missions.



7 New supes suit up for their Netflix debut in the Millarverse series **Jupiter's Legacy**.



9 Happy Mother's Day!

11 Today's Blu-ray crop yields superheroic Nazi-punching action in **Justice Society: World War II** and a cat-demon's heartwarming adventure in **The Legend of Hei**.



16 Sofia, Bulgaria hosts a colorful, six-day international animation confab with the **12th Golden Kukur** fest. [2021.animationfest-bg.eu]

18 New on disc: Disney's Southeast Asian epic **Raya and the Last Dragon**, Jean-François Laguionie & Xavier Picard's artistic feature **The Prince's Voyage**, sci-fi sitcom **Star Trek: Lower Decks S1** and Nicktoons classic **Rugrats: The Complete Series**.



20 **Animatricks** presents a dual focus on women directors and freedom of speech in this year's four-day Helsinki, Finland festival. [animatricks.net]

21 Hulu's **M.O.D.O.K.** casts the exasperated Marvel supervillain in a stop-mo sitcom. Meanwhile, a new threat emerges in S3 of DreamWorks' **Jurassic World: Camp Cretaceous** on Netflix.



23 Amy Poehler's **Duncanville** S2 hits FOX with a special two-episode season premiere.



25 Cartoon Network's **Infinity Train: Book Two** brings Mirror Tulip and Jesse's adventures home on disc.

28 Can a chain-smoking puppy-skinner get an edgy antihero makeover? We'll find out as audiences take in Disney's live-action **101 Dalmatians** prequel, **Cruella**.



29 The 4th **Ibero-American Animation Quirino Awards** announces winners in nine categories from La Laguna, Tenerife tonight. [premiosquirino.org]

31 Lisa Kudrow stars as a dog who leads therapy sessions for suburban pets in the latest FOX adult animated comedy addition, **Housebroken**.



To get your company's events and products listed in this monthly calendar, please e-mail edit@animationmagazine.net.



WELCOME TO THE FUN ROBOCALYPSE!

Writer-director Mike Rianda gives us a special sneak peek at his inventive, funny and ultimately poignant family feature *The Mitchells vs. the Machines*.

By Ramin Zahed

Writer-director Mike Rianda has a lot of great memories growing up with his brother and sister in a tightly knit family in Salinas, Calif. He also loves dinosaurs, robots, apocalyptic movies and pop culture. You can find a lot of his favorite things in the hilarious and highly original new animated feature *The Mitchells vs. the Machines*. Although the theatrical release of the Sony Pictures Animation title (which was renamed *Connected* for a while) fell victim to the pandemic last fall, audiences can finally enjoy the feature when it premieres on Netflix in May.

Rianda, who was the creative director on Disney Channel's acclaimed series *Gravity Falls*, recalls how he came up with the idea for the movie back in December 2014. "I wanted to make the kind of animated movie that my friends and I would want to see," he explains. "I remember taking a long car drive from L.A. to Salinas, so I turned on my tape recorder and came up with the story that eventually became this movie. I love my own weird family, and I love robots. My own dad (who is the in-



spiration for Rick Mitchell, the father in the movie) is an outdoors person, and he hates technology so much. I thought it would be really funny if he was caught up in a *robocalypse*. I also know that every family is dealing with technology and how it can come between parents and their kids. So all these ideas merged

together as I sat down to write the movie."

The film, which is co-directed by Jeff Rowe (writer on *Gravity Falls* and *Disenchantment*), follows the adventures of a typical suburban family who take a road trip to drop off artistic older daughter Katie (*Broad City's* Abbi Jacobson) at film school in California. However, they

Through Katie's Eyes: The film's creative team used fun, eye-catching visuals to show how the young, artistic heroine of the movie sees the world.



find themselves in the strange position of saving the world from a sinister robot takeover. Danny McBride and Maya Rudolph voice the parents, while Rianda himself voices younger brother Aaron and celebrity pup Doug the Pug lends his snorting talents to the family's pug, Monchi! The film also includes hand-held computer visionary Dr. Mark Bowman (voiced by Eric André) and his needy Alexa-esque personal assistant PAL (Olivia Colman).

"One of the reasons the movie really strikes a chord is because the material feels autobiographical," says Kristine Belson, Sony Pictures Animation President. "Mike Rianda is a creative force, very much like Katie Mitchell, and the movie delicately handles that universal idea of the generational divide, which happens when parents and their kids don't value the same things and fail to understand each other. We felt that *The Mitchells* was the perfect opportunity for us to explore this fresh world which was quite different from all the other movies we had done in the past."

Belson also points out that Rianda and his artistic team wanted the central family to be unlike other animated clans of the big screen. "The families we often see in animated movies are often whitewashed and glossed over," she says. "What we loved about Rianda's vision was the way he and his team created a world that reflected how real people live today. The Mitchells live in a modest home in the Midwest. They don't have time to make their beds every day



'As corny as it sounds, the pandemic really reminded us how important we all are to each other and how we go crazy when we can't see each other. I'd run through a brick wall to be able to hug my parents right now.'

— Writer/director Mike Rianda

and make sure everything is completely neat and organized. They shop at discount stores and the carpet in the house is threadbare. But they treat everything with love."

The Lord and Miller Touch

Also helping out with the movie were exec producers Phil Lord and Chris Miller, who felt an instant kinship with the director after they met him at Sony as they were finishing work on *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*. "We were really inspired by Mike, his story and his ability to tell a joke, but also care about the emotionality of it," says Lord. "It can make you laugh and make you cry. We thought, that's an instant win. Someone who is really good at both things would be a good person to be in business with."

Miller also praises Rianda's team for really pushing the film in terms of its original visuals. He explains, "Mike's goal was to bring a homemade, handcrafted feel to the project, so when we see things through Katie's POV, he wanted it to feel like her mixed-media student films. That's why the studio developed a watercolor style for the movie, so that every frame felt hand-painted and we see this story

through 'Katie Vision,' which bursts with creative energy and dazzling colors."

One of the stand-out qualities that sets *Mitchells* apart from other big CG-animated studio fare is its unique visual stamp. "Big studio animated movies are often beautiful," explains Rianda. "Audiences are just accustomed to seeing a very high level of incredible artistry on the big screen. We were thinking that if we ever got to do our own movie, we would have the chance to do things a little bit differently. Our production designer Lindsey Olivares came up with these amazing early drawings for the movie, and we thought, 'Wow, what if the movie looked just like your drawings?'"

For Rowe, the movie stood out as a wonderful tribute to the characters that both directors knew and identified with. "I love that the movie is very observed and naturalistic," says Rowe. "I mean, yes we have laser-shooting giant Furbys and a robot city, but at its core, it's a very well-grounded movie. We pay a lot of attention to the details of the characters. They feel complex emotions and have flaws and wants that are in opposition to each other. We were hoping to offer more emotional depth than your average animated movie."

According to Rowe, making the movie felt like walking on a balance beam, where you had to fall on the side of technology or humanity. "It felt it was too easy to say, 'Oh, look, technology and phones are ruining the world. Nobody retains information anymore!' But then, it just felt untrue. We felt like old men who were shaking their fists in the air and saying, 'Put down your phones, kids!' We didn't believe any of that and didn't want it to be the message of the movie. Technology can be amazing. You can meet like-minded people from all over the world. Katie Mitchell has tools that no other generations before had access to. She can shoot and edit movies on her own, etc. Both Mike and I want the movie to say that a good balance is what we need. It's good to embrace the positive aspects of technology, but it's wrong to use it to avoid dealing with the world."

To get the details of the Mitchells' car trek across America right, Rianda, Rowe and some of the key members of the art and design team decided to plan a road trip themselves. "I told them we could go to my family's house in Salinas or

we can go to Las Vegas, and they picked Vegas, of course," says Rianda. "One of the storyboard artists suggested that we stop using our cell phones and see what happens. So as soon as we put our phones in a bag, we started having really great, intimate conversations. It was funny how we started connecting as soon as the technology went away!"

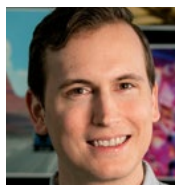
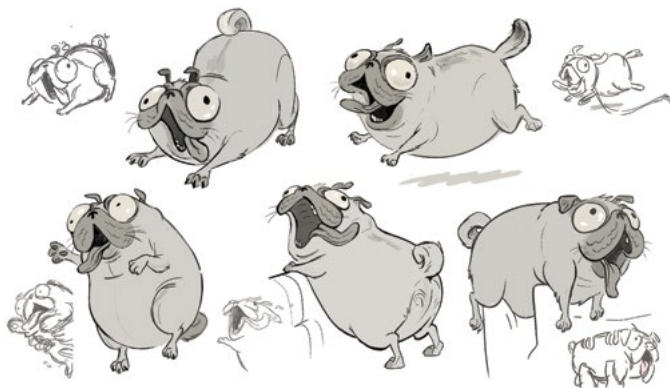
The director and his team have waited a long time for their labor of love to reach their target audience. But Rianda mentions that the extra time allowed them to fine tune all the jokes and nuances. "One thing we learned from working with Chris and Phil is the way we combed through the movie over and over again and made little adjustments and improvements," he points out. "It's really an evolution as we try these sporadic mutations based on everyone's guts. You give birth to these changes: Some of them die and some flourish, so you hang on to the ones that are successful. As a result, we did a lot of screw-tightening."

Worth the Wait

Looking back, Rianda says he's very happy with the final results. "I can say that I don't



All in the Family: The film's loving Mitchell family was inspired in part by writer-director Mike Rianda's own parents and siblings. The family dog Monchi is voiced by Doug the Pug!



"Both Mike and I want the movie to say that a good balance is what we need. It's good to embrace the positive aspects of technology, but it's wrong to use to avoid dealing with the world."

— **Writer/co-director Jeff Rowe**

have any regrets as I watch the movie. As awful as the COVID year was, the thing that I was impressed with was how much we were able to connect with each other via Skype and Zoom, and we were able to finish the movie with relative ease. Without the technology, we wouldn't have been able to do this."

Technology also helped Rianda screen the movie with his family and the cast and crew. "I was more nervous showing the movie to my family than the rest of the world," he admits. "They have always been tough critics to please, but they really loved this one. Our Zoom screening was amazing. My dad was showing all his hunting stuff to the crew and they were cheering him on!"

As we get towards the end of our interview, Rianda says, "As corny as it sounds, the pandemic really reminded us how important we all are to each other and how we go crazy when we can't see each other. I'd run through

a brick wall to be able to hug my parents right now. So, you find yourself grateful to technology because it lets you interact with your family and friends."

"I really do hope that if a kid is watching the movie, he or she can laugh at the jokes, but also appreciate what their parents are going through," he notes. "Also, I hope parents realize that maybe they're not paying enough attention or encouraging their children enough. I guess we're trying to bring families together. On a less grand scale, I hope families can watch our movie together, just like my family used to watch movies like *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Uncle Buck* together when I was a kid. That was always the best night of the month, because we'd all spend time together and quote our favorite lines from the movies." ♦

The Mitchells vs. the Machines premieres on Netflix on April 30.



BEST ANIMATED FEATURE

Wolfwalkers

Screen Ireland congratulates Cartoon Saloon
on their Academy Award® Nomination



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FROM THE SWAMP TO THE CITY

Ryan Crego, the creator behind Netflix's *Arlo the Alligator Boy*, shares a few secrets about his super fun new musical movie.

By Tom McLean

“At heart, I’m a story person,” says Ryan Crego, creator, writer and director of the animated musical feature *Arlo the Alligator Boy*. “And so a lot of ideas really come from sketches rather than words. I just tend to find that that’s where I build characters and start to create stories, so that’s where Arlo came from.”

When the movie premieres this month on Netflix, audiences will discover that Arlo is an unrelenting optimist. And his positivity is as infectious as the energetic, thoroughly modern pop tunes that propel his story through the feature and toward an upcoming follow-up series, titled *I Heart Arlo*.

Arlo’s arrival has been a long time coming for Crego, who first came up with the character more than 10 years ago. Crego says his initial pitch for an Arlo project was rejected back then and he shelved it for several years before returning to the optimistic little ‘gator from the swamp.

A Pure Heart vs. the World

The character was inspired by Crego’s love for movies like *Elf*, where a pure-hearted character is thrown out into the world to see how they measure up. Crego says *Arlo* was his first attempt at pitching a movie, and looking back at it, he understands why his original version failed to gain traction. “I go back and look at that now and I just think I didn’t know what I was doing, and I get why no one wanted it,” he says.

When finishing his commitments for other projects, Crego says his wife suggested he revisit the project. “I was like, ‘Yeah, but I can think of something fresh! I need something new,’” he says. But revisiting it with new skills and a fresh perspective revealed the project’s potential. “I kind of realized I never really fleshed it out the way that it could have been fleshed out,” he says. “And then I just fell in love with the world again, and the characters again, and really started to build the journey out.”

The movie kicks things off with Arlo, voiced

by singer and *American Idol* contestant Michael J. Woodard, set adrift at birth in a basket that floats downriver until it delivers him to the swamps of Louisiana, where he’s taken in by kindly Edmée, voiced by Annie Potts. Arlo grows up happy until Edmée reveals the truth about Arlo’s origin and his parents, prompting him to leave home for New York City in search of his real father, wealthy Ansel Beauregard, voiced by *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*’s Vincent Rodriguez III.

Along the way, Arlo meets friends and foes. The former include Bertie, voiced by singer Mary Lambert, a mountain of a girl with a heart to match; an oddball fur ball named Furlucia, voiced by Jonathan Ness of *Queer Eye*; cat girl Alia, voiced by Haley Tju; an elf with an Italian-American perspective on life, Teeny Tiny Tony, voiced by Tony Hale; and man-fish Marcellus, voiced by Brett Gelman of *Stranger Things* fame. Opposing them are Stucky, voiced by Jennifer Coolidge; and Ruff, voiced by the

Band of Musical Misfits: Always optimistic Arlo (voiced by Michael J. Woodard) and his friends Bertie (Mary Lambert), Teeny Tiny Tony (Tony Hale), Furlucia (Jonathan Van Ness) and Alia (Haley Tju) face the world with a bright attitude.



Red Hot Chili Peppers' Michael "Flea" Balzary — a pair of low-rent entrepreneurs out to exploit Arlo for their own benefit.

Crego's revised pitch drew attention from Netflix, which committed to both a movie and the follow-up series, set to debut later in 2021. "Obviously, once you have someone believing in your idea, then it becomes a whole other thing — and it is infectious," he notes.

Each character has its quirks, and Crego says he tried to put a little of himself into each one. "I tried to follow what I think is right — for myself and for people around me — and try to treat people with respect," he says. "But also I feel like a lot of the other characters are fairly broken and have a lot of deficiencies."

Crego, who was a story artist on DreamWorks movies such as *Shrek Forever After*, *Kung Fu Panda 2*, *Puss in Boots* and *Mr. Peabody & Sherman* and went on to become supervising director on *Sanjay and Craig* and exec producer on *Home: Adventures with Tip & Oh*, says his personal experiences played into the creation of the characters. "I think a lot about my own life, growing up and going to L.A. and being in a big city and sort of discovering yourself and finding a home," he says. "I think it really is sort of a story about, can you keep your purity and your senses and remain good in the face of all of these things that the world throws at you — and beyond that, help people?"

The relationship between Arlo and Bertie forms the core of the movie. "She needs him more than she knows," he says. "She unfolds and lowers her barriers and lets him in, and he's this character who just can't not be good; he can't not be positive. And then when he really needs her the most, when he's the most damaged and broken, she's there for him. And I think that kind of trade-off, of how friends



"I think it really is sort of a story about, can you keep your purity and your senses and remain good in the face of all of these things that the world throws at you — and beyond that, help people?"

— **Writer-director Ryan Crego**

and family members can really lift each other up, is a really special message."

Casting also played a key role, with Crego saying he wanted to create characters with depth, while also leaving room for Lambert and Woodard in particular to find room to play versions of themselves, too. "I can't really separate the people from the characters, in a lot of ways," he says.

Crego early on pitched taking the animation production aspect to Titmouse, discussing with the studio's execs Chris Prynosi, Antonio Cannobbio and Ben Kalina the challenges of creating a 2D movie that looks like a feature and can be adapted to a follow-up series. "They kind of

said, 'Look, if you really want the highest quality, if you want to make something that's at a feature level, we've got to do it in house, because all of these departments have to talk to each other,' Crego says. "And the more we talked about it, the more that felt right."

With the movie having a production home, Crego's list of collaborators grew, starting with Clay Senechal, who co-wrote the movie. "He was a great sounding board and also just a really fantastic wordsmith and dialogue writer and really helped me kind of keep everything on track," Crego says.

Crego also tapped into collaborators for character design, admitting up front that as a



designer, he's a great storyboard artist. Crego connected with art director Israel Sanchez through Netflix. "I knew that the world would be 2D, and I wanted something that was going to be classic in a way, but not necessarily derivative," says Crego. "[Sanchez] just has a fantastic style. A lot of the background design is really his taste and his pen."

He also credits concept designer Hae Jung Michelle Park, character designer David De-Pasquale and additional art director Margaret Wuller, who helped elevate the look of the movie to a feature level. "We had this core team of artists that were plussing each other's work and just trying to find ways to make it feel really deep and rich without breaking the style," he says.

Getting the Band Together Again!

No discussion of *Arlo the Alligator Boy* would be complete without a dive into the musical element. The songs, written by Crego and Alex Geringas, propel the story forward with a modern pop sensibility and the kind of relentless, positive energy of Arlo himself. Crego drew on his past experience playing in bands around Los Angeles — a vocation he gave up as he focused on his animation career. At first, Crego asked Geringas, whom he's worked with on the *Home* series for DreamWorks, to write all the songs, thinking he could just pitch the moments and serve as the bridge between Gerin-



gas on the music and Senechal on the script.

"That didn't work, because he immediately, as we started talking about it, starts working in the room. And then we start talking and then we're writing all of a sudden," Crego says. "He turned to me at some point in the process and said, 'Hey, I'm not going to write the songs without you.'"

Together, they wrote something like 30 to 40 songs, with 10 of them making it into the movie and becoming essential to its storytelling. "It became obvious, I would say, after the first screening that the music was just the best part of telling the story," he says.

With the feature's debut set, Crego and crew

have moved on to working on the series, which will follow later this year. Crego says the ending of the movie leads directly into the series premise, which he describes as more like a sitcom.

"You've got all these really fun, extreme personalities, and now they're at home in their little neighborhood making a life for themselves," he says. All of this is new for the characters, and it gives the writers a lot to play with. "My favorite episodes of the series so far are the ones where the least happens." ♦

Arlo the Alligator Boy premieres April 16 on Netflix.

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Clockwise from top left:
Rocket Monkeys, The Last Kids on Earth, Atomic Betty, The LEGO Star Wars Holiday Special, Mermicorn.

Atomic Power

We check in with the folks at Vancouver-, Ottawa- and LA-based Atomic Cartoons to see what's cooking at the creative Canadian hub.

It's hard to believe that it's been 22 years since Trevor Bentley, Mauro Casalese, Olaf Miller and Rob Davies decided to launch their own animation studio in Vancouver. The fab four animation pros initially formed Atomic Cartoons to help produce *Milo's Bug Quest* with Sunwoo Ent.'s Jae Moh. The studio, which was bought by Thunderbird Entertainment in 2015, has created or helped produce an impressive list of beloved animated gems throughout the years, including shows such as *Atomic Betty*, *Rocket Monkeys*, *Beat Bugs*, *Hilda*, *101 Dalmatian Street*, *Molly of Denali*, *The Last Kids on Earth*, *The LEGO Star Wars Holiday Special* and *Trolls: TrollsTopia*.

"Atomic was started by four artists in 1999," recalls founder and exec VP Bentley in a re-

cent email interview. "We had previously worked together at other studios and decided we should take our experience and try and do things a little differently. We began with one service client and started developing our show *Atomic Betty* shortly thereafter."

Atomic Betty was a beautifully designed, Flash-animated show produced with Tele Images Kids (France) and Breakthrough Films & TV (Canada), which followed the adventures of a not-so-typical 12-year-old girl from Moose Jaw,

who is also part of an interstellar crime-fighting force. It was an instant hit for the studio and ran for three seasons (2004-2008).

Prioritizing Talent and Diversity

According to studio president and CEO Jennifer McCarron, the studio continues to focus on building a culture of excellence and increasing IP ownership as the team launches its new CP & distribution division. "Service work and honoring all of our partners remains

'Our team is 45% male, 45% female and 10% gender fluid. In every fiber of our being, we know we are nothing without the amazing talent doing all the hard work and we strive to make Atomic the best run of people's careers.'

— Jennifer McCarron, president and CEO

a huge priority for us as well as we keep quality as our North Star,” says McCarron. “Focus on talent retention, diversity and inclusion remains paramount as we honor our greatest asset – our people.”

McCarron mentions that the company has grown in leaps and bounds, evolving from a 150-person studio primarily doing service work to a 700-plus studio with three locations in Vancouver, LA and Ottawa, with a growing focus on IP ownership and launching global content. “A focus on art and talent has been paramount since Atomic was launched in 1999, and remains key to this day,” she adds.

As CCO Matthew Berkowitz points out, “We have over 15 shows in production but unfortunately, as most haven’t been announced, we can’t say too many details – beyond sharing that we are privileged to be animating shows for clients and partners including Disney, Netflix, Universal, LEGO, HBO Max, DreamWorks, Apple, Adult Swim, PBS, Marvel, eOne, Hasbro and Spin Master! We’re also very excited about the progress on our IP development slate which is nearing 20 properties – all creator-driven, whether wholly original or adaptations!”

Berkowitz believes what sets Atomic apart from other similar studios is the passion the Atomic team has for animation and their commitment to its artists, creative partners and clients. “Our whole team loves to make cartoons: It’s a dream and a privilege to do it, and we aim to create an environment where artists can do the best work of their careers. We also work hard to foster a strong collaborative nature with our clients and partners. Finally, we firmly believe in not over-committing our studio, or taking on too much work. This way, both our artists as well as partners know we will be able to honor what we say we can do – and that’s to deliver top tier animation while having a great time in the process.”

One of the big priorities of the studio is to maintain a safe environment where everyone is honored, no one feels like a number and mistakes are more than OK, allowing innovation to occur, says McCarron. “Our team is 45% male, 45% female and 10% gender fluid. In every fiber of our being, we know we are nothing without the amazing talent doing all the hard work and we strive to make Atomic the best run of people’s careers.”

“Before joining Atomic, I couldn’t help notice that the studio was producing the highest-level of both storytelling and animation, and the sheer number of projects was incredibly impressive,” says Richard Goldsmith, the studio’s president of global distribution and

‘As a studio started by artists, the importance of the art is never far from our decision making process. We’ve always put as much or more weight to the creative opportunity for the team and studio on any given project, be it service or IP.’

— Trevor Bentley, co-founder and exec VP

consumer products. “Now, being a member of the Atomic team for the last few months, I am seeing another side of the company with its new pipeline of projects developed in-house in addition to the many series that we produce for clients such as Netflix, Disney, LEGO and Nickelodeon based on their IP.”

“It has been a truly rewarding experience to share Atomic’s development with platforms around the world who have known about Atomic but now have the opportunity to partner with us directly,” adds Goldsmith. “We are really excited about the future of our new distribution and consumer products divisions to turn our creations into inspiring series and global brands.”

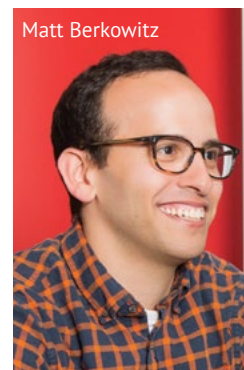
Eclectic Wheelhouse

Atomic currently produces content in both 2D and CG pipelines. The studio’s main tool set includes Harmony, Photoshop and Flash on the 2D side. The artists utilize Maya, Houdini and RenderMan to produce CG animation. Last March, the studio was able to transition smoothly to work-from-home to maintain the safety of the employees. “The key to Atomic’s success has always been our diverse and inclusive artist friendly culture – maintaining this while working 100% remotely has been our biggest and most important challenge of 2021,” says McCarron. “The teams work around the clock to make sure each and every individual is heard and receiving the support that they need.”

The Atomic team is happy to be riding the successful wave of animation in recent years.

“The heart and soul of our company is producing great content, and we are fortunate that the animation industry as a whole is experiencing its greatest growth in history,” notes Goldsmith. “Animation has proven to resonate with audiences of all ages, so platforms have expanded from kid-centric series to young adult and adult audiences. These platforms also understand the global nature of animated content versus live action. With this recognition, and the significant investment of both existing and new platforms in animated series, we are really focused on being great partners with platforms that we produce for.”

It’s hard not to notice the level of enthusiasm the Atomic team carries in their heart for



Matt Berkowitz



Richard Goldsmith



Trevor Bentley



Jennifer McCarron

the medium. “We get to make cartoons with amazing people,” says Berkowitz. “We all grew up loving the medium, and then when we started working in this industry – we realized the only thing better than making cartoons is the people you get to make them with. To be able to team up with such incredible talent, and build something through true teamwork and collaboration, is really special and incredibly rewarding.”

Another big motivation is to inspire the next generation of toon fanatics. “We all grew up watching cartoons, and those shows inspired us and helped mold us into who we are today. The absolute best part of our jobs is when we hear from kids or their families about what our shows mean to them. It’s beyond amazing that we have an opportunity to make a small impact in these kids’ lives,” concludes Berkowitz.

“As a studio started by artists, the importance of the art is never far from our decision making process,” notes Bentley. “We’ve always put as much or more weight to the creative opportunity for the team and studio on any given project, be it service or IP. The creative really does matter at Atomic!” ♦

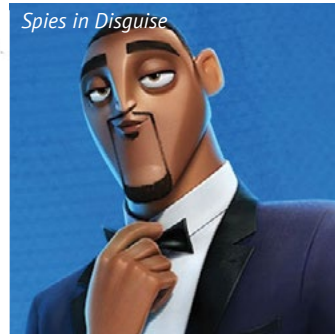
For more info, visit atomiccartoons.com.



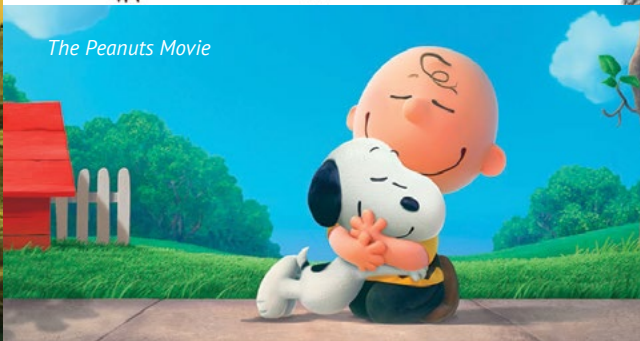
Epic



Ice Age



Spies in Disguise



The Peanuts Movie



Rio



Joe's Apartment



Horton Hears a Who!



Ferdinand

Off into the Wild Blue Sky

Reflecting upon the extinction of the *Ice Age* studio (1987-2021).

By Jake S. Friedman

The building was the size of a city block, plunked down in rural Greenwich, Connecticut. You could spend an hour walking the place, observing the different cultures of each department, the different crafts and artsy posters on display. It was arguably one of the most impressive animation studios in which we New York commuters had ever worked. Disney has owned Blue Sky Studios, the only current East Coast feature animation house, ever since it acquired Fox on March 20, 2019. On February 9 of this year, Disney announced that it would shut down Blue Sky after 34 years of operation and 13 feature films. And so, an era has ended. I had the unique experience of both working at Blue Sky — briefly, in

the storyboard department for the movie *Epic* — and then writing its definitive art book (*The Art of Blue Sky Studios*, Insight Editions, 2014). Here's what I learned, in a nutshell (no *Scrat* pun intended), as an insider.

Par for the course, Blue Sky started with advertisements. This was around 1990, when CG was still learning to walk. It was the first to animate M&M's characters in CG, talking to sitcom stars. All of the studio's commercials looked startlingly realistic, straight out of our actual world (something beyond even Pixar's purview at the time). For that, Blue Sky landed gigs splashing its animation seamlessly alongside live action — the cockroaches in *Joe's Apartment*, the penguin in *Fight Club*, the

singing dead fish in *The Sopranos*, and so on.

What they possessed was a proprietary program for life-like lighting, developed by programmer Dr. Eugene Troubetzkoy, with digital film recording technology by electrical engineer Carl Ludwig. Michael Ferraro was the systems specialist.

"The very early days of Blue Sky were us sitting in a 900-square-foot office, just programming, myself included — four of us," Chris Wedge told me in 2013. "After a while they would be writing code, and I would be exercising it, so for a year or two they said, 'You can do this with the code. Try it out!' and I'd try it out. I could make a shape, I could make another shape, I could put shapes together. I could

Scrat & Co.: Blue Sky at the Box Office

Release Date	Title	Global Box Office
March 2002	Ice Age	\$383,257,136
March 2005	Robots	\$262,511,490
March 2006	Ice Age 2	\$667,094,506
March 2008	Horton Hears a Who!	\$298,572,799
July 2009	Ice Age 3	\$886,686,817
April 2011	Rio	\$483,866,518
July 2012	Ice Age 4	\$877,244,782
May 2013	Epic	\$268,426,634
April 2014	Rio 2	\$498,781,117
Nov. 2015	The Peanuts Movie	\$246,233,113
July 2016	Ice Age 5	\$408,754,975
Dec. 2017	Ferdinand	\$296,069,199
Dec. 2019	Spies in Disguise	\$171,616,764

'The artists were truly the stars of Blue Sky. The films had visual development by modern masters like Peter de Sève, William Joyce and Mary GrandPré. But everything that made it to screen had a level of artistic integrity.'

put a surface on it, I could make it look like it cast a shadow. Month by month, year by year, we started building up these capabilities, building the software. You couldn't buy this stuff back then. Everybody's stuff was proprietary. It was forward-engineering. We were making it from scratch."

The ultimate breakthrough was "Radiosity," the way light bounced off surfaces and (gasp!) textures – this made their worlds believable and immersive. And this made the short film *Bunny* (1998) look real. Wedge's direction gave it heart. The combination led to an Academy Award.

Blue Sky's rendering of fur was a huge breakthrough in the 1990s (how much fur do you see in Pixar's *Toy Story*?) and so the studio ran with that into *Ice Age* (2002). The studio attests that the *Ice Age* film series is (or was in 2013) the most popular animated film fran-

chise globally. They said that its themes of mixed family dynamics, of love overpowering dysfunction, transcend borders. Oh, and apparently the side-character-as-a-running-gag shtick? The folks at Blue Sky looked at DreamWorks' sidekick characters and pointed to their own Scrat v. Acorn saga with a boastful, "We did it first!"

A Haven for Artists

The artists were truly the stars of Blue Sky. The films had visual development by modern masters like Peter de Sève, William Joyce and Mary GrandPré. But everything that made it to screen had a level of artistic integrity. The *Rio* films *look* and *feel* like Rio. Brazilian-born director Carlos Saldanha has become, I was told, a national hero in his homeland. The directors of *Horton Hears a Who!* were blessed by Dr. Se-

uss's widow, and created a whole Seussian style guide. The Charles Schulz estate toured the studio and worked closely in pre-production of *The Peanuts Movie*. They were wowed by the talent on site! (I know because I was there.)

It was hard not to drop your jaw in wonder. Turn the corner and there was a mannequin wearing a replica of Bomba's gizmo-covered outfit from *Epic*. Over to the other side was the amazing room of maquettes. If you wandered over past the sweatboxes (yes, that's what they, too, called the screening rooms) to the story department, a wall of staff caricatures going back years stretched the length of the hallway. The animators' bay was particularly remarkable – some ambitious folks had constructed walls around their workstations to resemble tree houses, a pirate ship or a hunting lodge. In my wanderings, I even uncovered some artwork for an unproduced animated shorts program.

There were people who had been there since the beginning, and others who had been industry veterans since the 1980s. Since many of the staff commuted and shared a company shuttle, people mingled who otherwise wouldn't have met. It created a summer-camp culture of sublimely talented people.

One wall near post-production sported a poster mapping the "History of Animation." It's funny. About 50 years stretched between the last big East Coast animation house (Fleischer Studios) and Blue Sky. No film studio close to Blue Sky's magnitude has graced this side of the world, and probably none will again. But that chart is already out of date. Blue Sky belongs on that poster. Its place in the History of Animation is undeniable. And the films – as well as the memories – will live on.

Jake S. Friedman is an author and animation historian with two books coming out next year. Follow him on Twitter and Instagram @ JakeSFriedman.



Sky Riders: Studio founder Chris Wedge (left) and director Carlos Saldanha (*Rio*, *Ferdinand*) stayed true to their artistic visions throughout the years.

Rising Stars of Animation 2021

One of the highlights of this publication's regular coverage of the animation scene is our early spring spotlight on the year's up-and-coming talent. The class of 2021 is certainly one of the most impressive, diverse and creative groups of shining stars in recent memory. It's so encouraging to see so many brilliant artists exploring new ways of telling their stories and expressing their true visions in different media today. We can't wait to see what they'll share with us in the months ahead. (Don't forget to visit our website for a special hour-long video spotlight on these 16 scene-stealers.) Drumroll, please:



Carlos Baena

Director, *The Tiger's Apprentice* [Paramount]

Stats: 46, born in Canary Islands and raised in Madrid, Spain.

I knew I wanted to work in animation: When I moved to the U.S. in 1993 to study art. While growing up in Spain, I was not aware one could actually work in the field of animation even though I loved movies from a young age. It wasn't until I watched the films *Nightmare Before Christmas* and *Toy Story*

that I wanted to learn more about animation and film.

First job: I just finished a 2D short film and a bunch of 3D animation exercises in early 1998. For about a half year I was sending old VHS demo reel tapes and resumes to many places unsuccessfully. This was a challenging time because if I didn't find a job, I'd have to return to Spain due to my visa status. Though later that summer I was lucky that I was hired by Will Vinton Studios to work on the M&M's CG commercials. During the day, I'd work on the computer, and during the evening, once my day job ended, the studio allowed me to practice stop-motion animation on one of their unused sets. It was a great first job that gave me wonderful memories.

What I love about working on the movie: Many things. I feel fortunate I get to work on something unique and learn from my co-workers constantly. I'm also very thankful we have the support of Paramount Animation when pushing towards creating something different, as well as

having a truly dedicated team around the world. It's an important film for me because of personal reasons. The film is based on a beautiful book written by Laurence Yep, and also portrays an inspiring message that I love, especially in a time where there's been so much division in our country.

Toughest part: Nothing comes easy in animation, that's for sure! Even projects or shots that I thought at times would be simple, ended up surprising me. Additionally, I found things tend to take a lot longer in 3D animation to produce and not necessarily in the most affordable way, which makes it challenging to try things outside the box within our medium. But I personally have liked the challenge over the years. If it's too easy, I feel like it's missing something.

Favorite toons growing up: I wasn't big into animation growing up. I remember watching the old versions of *The Jungle Book* and *The Sword in the Stone* as well as Takahashi's *Captain Tsubasa* anime. It was definitely during and after college that I started studying it seriously. Since then I've really enjoyed and been inspired by films such as *The Iron Giant*, *Spirited Away* and the works of Satoshi Kon.

Best advice: I'd say, to not get ahead of yourself. Not to rush. I've made that mistake a few times, and it always makes me want to take a few steps back. So take your time learning different things at whichever pace feels right to you. Additionally, leave room for learning, even if you made it to your dream job. And lastly, don't forget to have a life outside the computer screen. Those experiences will give you the best animation material you can ask for.



Alfonso Blaas

Production Designer, *Trollhunters: Rise of the Titans* [DreamWorks]

Stats: 42, from Granada, Spain.

I knew I wanted to work in animation: Back in 2001, I had the luck to visit my brother at Blue Sky Animation studios and meet some of the crew during the production of *Ice Age*. Blew my mind to see what a collective group of artists could achieve, that was my turning point.

First Job: I worked hard my last two years of Fine Arts creating a portfolio with my own artwork. At that moment there was an animation fever in Spain, producing several projects and demanding a lot of local talent. I was

hired as a matte painter at Filmax Animation Studio.

What I love about working on the movie: Since I heard for the first time about Guillermo del Toro's *Trollhunters*, back in 2012, I thought right away it was the type of show I loved to watch and experience when I was a kid. Being able to collectively give shape and form to this universe during the series has been wonderful. Creating this movie with much more visuals and creative ambitions with an amazing team is a dream come true.

The toughest part: Balancing the best visuals we can get and the time we have, both collectively and personally.

Fave toons growing up: *Akira*, *Sherlock Hound*, *The Jungle Book*, *Batman: The Animated Series*.

Best advice: Building your own reference library or tools to be able to understand what the creator wants and how to communicate that idea to others.

Shabrayia Cleaver

Production Manager, *Spirit Untamed* [DreamWorks]

Stats: 30, LA native (Northridge, Calif.)

I wanted to work in animation when: I didn't realize being in animation was my dream career until I interned in animation. As a film major at Cal State Fullerton, I needed an internship to graduate, and it just so happens DreamWorks Animation was posting for interns. With absolutely no knowledge in animation, I applied for the internship not

knowing what that meant. When I was called in for the interview, I just *knew* they were going to ask me to draw and they'd find out I was a fraud! I was *stressed*. Spoiler alert, they didn't. I was brought on as a production intern on *How to Train Your Dragon 2* and that's where I truly discovered that animation was my forever home. The people I met and interacted with during my first week were so welcoming and vibrant – I knew this was only an environment I could get in animation.

My first job in animation: I remember being on the set for *So You Think You Can Dance* when I got the call about an open position as a lighting production assistant on the movie *Home*. Fresh out of college, I knew it had to be fate because the film featured a young Black girl navigating a strange new environment.

What I love about the job: Being at DreamWorks specifically, it's the culture, the people, the evolving landscape. Because animation is so collaborative, working together and helping each other just becomes a part of the culture. I've had the opportunity to meet some of the most brilliant and talented people from all different backgrounds. Someone at DreamWorks said something to me, and it really stuck: "If you're not having fun, you're fired." If you're not having a good time making animated films, then you're not doing something right.



Toughest part: As a production manager, I am overseeing the whole production, so I am involved in every aspect of pulling the film together. As challenging as this is to juggle being involved in all the little details day to day, it has also been the most gratifying to be the person who knows where everything is at. Production managers are constantly challenging the theory that "you can't be everywhere at once." Since I am naturally the middle woman between the creatives who are driving the look and story and the crew who has to carry out the execution of making the film, I've really been able to enhance my bartering skills! It's all about finding creative solutions to make everyone happy.

Favorite toons growing up: I loved animated films that were a bit edgier because I always thought I was more grown than I was. That's why I watched more DreamWorks movies like *Shrek* and *Megamind*, which I felt were rooted in wholesome underlying themes with just a touch of subtle adult humor. My after school series regulars were shows like *Proud Family*. It was a perfect coming of age show because I literally was Penny Proud – trying to juggle school, my nagging family, hanging with my friends, boys!

Best advice: Stay on top of your game. This industry is ever changing and evolving. Find ways to stay ahead of it by studying new softwares and techniques and sharpening your soft skills. A lot of what makes you successful in this industry is your interpersonal skills and your ability to communicate and work on a team. Although there is a severe lack of representation in animation, don't be intimidated by that. Use that to propel you forward and motivate you to break into this industry so that you can open doors for other people who hadn't been given the opportunity because they didn't fit the mold. Just because the space isn't filled with people who look like you, doesn't mean you don't belong in that space. And lastly, bring yourself fully and authentically to everything that you do. Being you is what makes you unique. Don't ever feel like you need to fit into a cookie cutter mold.

Wendell Dalit

Art Director, *Vivo* [Sony Pictures Animation]

Stats: 32, from San Jose, California

I knew I wanted to work in animation: When I was in college I spontaneously decided to take a 2D animation class. The assignments were incredibly challenging, and I had no idea what I was doing but I truly enjoyed the projects. Towards the end of that class I came to the realization that I've put more time and effort into these assignments than anything else I've ever done – and had a great time doing it. I changed my major to animation the next semester.

First job: I was very lucky to connect with Jana Day, the recruiter for Sony Pictures Animation at CTN animation eXpo. I was able to keep in touch with her, and towards the end of my time in school she got me going on my first project as a visual development artist on *Smurfs: The Lost Village*.

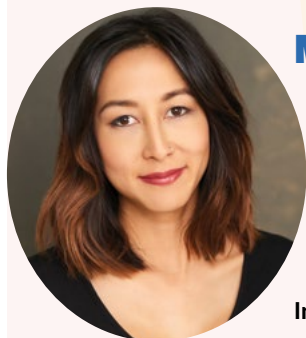
What I love about working on *Vivo*: Music and dance have always been a passion of mine, and to be able to work on a project that embraced the two was an amazing experience for me. Additionally, this project was a great opportunity to explore a variety of visual styles that enhance the emotional beats for each musical number in the film.

The toughest part: The toughest part about working in animation is ... animation! It never comes easy, and I feel like I struggle every day but it is also what I love to do. One of our biggest challenges on *Vivo* was to make each musical number feel unique in its own way. It is an incredibly challenging task – to try new things in a CG animated film – but there's a feeling of accomplishment and pride I get once things start to click into place. Seeing how all the amazing artists working on the project executed the cool new ideas on screen is truly a rewarding experience for me.

Fave toons growing up: *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Doug*, *Hey Arnold!*, *Toy Story* – all favorites from my childhood.

Best advice: Be open-minded and don't stop learning. There are always going to be new things to learn that you can add to your animation toolbox.





Megan Nicole Dong

Creator, Exec Producer, *Centaurworld* [Netflix]

Stats: 35, from Diamond Bar, Calif.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: One of my earliest memories involves repeatedly pausing *The Little Mermaid* on VHS and trying to figure out how to draw Ariel on my Magna Doodle. I always loved watching *Behind the Scenes* footage and thought it would be amazingly cool to draw cartoons for a living.

First job in animation: I interned at Titmouse studios and then went on to work there for a couple of years. I got to touch a lot of projects and learned a ton from my peers (a couple of whom went on to work with me on this show!).

Inspiration for *Centaurworld*: I grew up in an academically competitive community. My freshman year of high school, I was supposed to play violin in my school orchestra, but I had a schedule conflict with one of my honors classes. The only extra-curricular that fit my schedule was show choir and it completely changed my life. It really made me fall in love with theater, music and performance, and it cemented the idea that I wanted to pursue an arts-based career. I wanted to tell the story of a character who truly believed she had to live her life one way dropped into a silly, strange new place that fundamentally changes her. I am passionate about a lot of different things, and I wanted to make a show that melded genres together, but most importantly, it had to be a musical series with songs interwoven with the narrative.

Toughest part: There are so many moving parts and so much to juggle! Maintaining a clear creative vision is extremely important, but knowing how to clearly communicate that vision to those around you is also huge. It's also important to know what to prioritize, how you'd like to spend your time creatively, and where to step back and really trust those around you. Trust is a big deal for me and I believe people do their best work when they are given a bit of breathing room and more agency to bring themselves to a project. It's easy to get tunnel vision, but it's important to remember that human beings are working with you to make your idea a reality!

Fave toons growing up: I consumed a lot of Disney and Miyazaki movies. *The Little Mermaid* and *My Neighbor Totoro* were probably the two films I watched over and over again during my formative years. I also loved all things *Looney Tunes*, *Dragon Ball* and most Saturday morning cartoons.

Best advice: I think a lot of artists err toward being shy and self conscious. Find some way to get used to sharing your work with others, being collaborative and putting yourself out there! I'm naturally a shy person, but for *Centaurworld* I pitched the storyboard for our first episode to a lot of the people we brought onboard. It generated a lot of productive conversation/ideas early on and even though it was a lot of work, I wouldn't have done it differently. I'm a big believer in hitting things hard up front, so that things are easier as the process goes on.



Megan Ferguson

Assistant Director, *Hilda* [Mercury Filmworks]

Stats: 35, from British Columbia, currently living in Ottawa.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: To be completely honest, I didn't really 'know' I really wanted to stay in animation until I had already worked on a few shows. Animation was something I followed as a career because I felt like drawing was

my strongest skill, and while I did enjoy it as an audience member, I really struggled with understanding it. I knew enough to get through and hired, but I had moments where I questioned my choices. It wasn't until I got more experience with it did I start to find more joy, and then the passion grew from there.

First job in animation: Mercury Filmworks happened to be hiring when I graduated. I handed them in a demo reel and got in. Completely standard! Ha!

What I love about working on *Hilda*: I love that I've had the ability and space to really grow, make mistakes and take ownership of my choices. We have a lot of creative voices on this show but none of them are so strict there isn't room for flexibility. The trust I get from my crew to make hard decisions or implement new structure has been invaluable, and it's really shaped what kind of director I want to be if the chance

comes up. The creative aspect of the show has been huge, but what I really get my energy and joy from is just seeing everyone around me on this journey and having us all grow together.

Toughest part: Knowing how much I affect the crew is a tough thing to wrap my mind around sometimes. I want to feel like I'm just an individual, but the reality is how I react and act on a day to day basis can really trickle down. It costs nothing to be patient, address something more thoughtfully and not let a bad mood get in the way of how I communicate with my crew. I'm better at it now than I was when I started, and making those mistakes right away helped me realize that I play a huge part in overall team morale.

Fave toons growing up: Watching *ReBoot* was a tradition in my childhood. My mom was into 3D animation, and it was something we watched together all the time. She encouraged my hobbies, so a lot of my early teenage years were spent consuming random anime subtitled VHS tapes she found at Blockbuster or from her friends. Just random genres and series that were probably aimed for an older audience than me at the time.

Best advice: Advocate for yourself and be confident, the deadlines are fast, budgets are tight and pressure can get high. It's easy to tie up our sense of self-worth in our job, so when there are so many factors out of your control in TV animation, it's easy to burn out. Keep one foot out of the whirlpool by keeping your health in check and having a good support system outside of your studio role. Community and relationships keep us from losing our identity to this job.



DREAMWORKS

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OUR RISING STARS



SHABRAYIA CLEAVER
PRODUCTION MANAGER
SPIRIT UNTAMED



ALFONSO BLAAS
PRODUCTION DESIGNER
TROLLHUNTERS:
RISE OF THE TITANS



Valtteri Heinonen

Art Director, *Moominvalley* [Gutsy Animation]

Stats: 37, from Helsinki, Finland.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I've been drawing and making little animations ever since I was in third grade, but the first time I felt a serious inclination towards working in animation was probably when *Toy Story* came out. Before then, I just enjoyed watching animated films, but after seeing *Toy Story*, every time I watched an animated film, I spent half the time enjoying the story but the other half trying to figure out how they did every little thing.

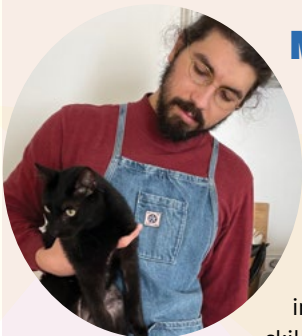
First job: In school we were required to do a four-month internship in a company of our choosing, and I actually applied to the biggest animation studio in Finland but didn't get in. Instead, I found a placement in a production company that worked in advertising. I came from a 3D graphics school, so at first they gave me 3D animation work, but after completing a digital painting assignment, they felt I was much more valuable as an illustrator — after the internship they actually hired me in such a role. I then spent 10 years working in advertising until Marika Makaroff asked me to join Gutsy Animations on the *Moominvalley* TV series.

What I love about working on the show: I love my working relationship with production designer Sarah Hauldren. I think she's exactly the kind of counterpart that I needed to elevate my work to a new level. I feel like I act as a sort of bridge between her traditional ways of working and the digital world, and so I get to dip into both sides. It's also great that I get to do lots of different things on the show, including set design, character design, texture painting and animation.

Toughest part: The biggest challenge is to paint images to serve multiple purposes. I mostly work on images that are primarily meant to show the animation studio what is in the scene and how it looks in flat lighting. This means there can be no interesting angles or lighting to make it artistic, yet they will be used as part of the show's marketing and brand licensing activity, which means they can't be completely sterile either.

Favorite toons growing up: Oh, I had hundreds of favorites. If I were to choose ones that really shaped me, they'd be *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, *Alfred J. Kwak*, *Starzinger*, *The Secret of NIMH*, *The Sword in the Stone* and *Aladdin*.

Best advice: My advice, apart from endless practice, is to try and find a person you can develop ideas with. A lot of the time it's out of your hands and down to a little bit of luck, but generally just trying to work *with* people rather than *for* them is a big step in the right direction.



Manny Hernandez

Exec Producer, *We Baby Bears* [Cartoon Network]

Stats: 35, from San Diego, Calif.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I'm not totally sure, but there was this one time in second grade where the assignment was to draw a frog. I remember this little girl sitting next to me and when she saw my drawing she said, "Wow! That looks just like a frog!" That might have been the first time I got recognition for being an artist. It made me happy.

First job in animation: I was accepted into the Pixar Animation Studios internship program. I must have made a good impression because they hired me right after I finished the internship. In fact, I was told that I wasn't hired for my artistic skills. They said that my personality and sheer gumption is what got me hired.

What I love about working on *We Baby Bears*: There are *too many* reasons to love working on the show. First off, I couldn't ask for a better crew. Seriously. Second, is that I love being challenged. And nothing challenges me more than having to explain my vision to a bunch of people within an incredibly limited time frame.

Toughest part: Having to explain my vision to a bunch of people within an incredibly limited time frame.

Favorite toons growing up: *The Simpsons* is my favorite American TV show. *Dragon Ball* was the first anime I ever thoroughly watched (in Spanish). *Looney Tunes* was my childhood therapy, and *One Piece* will always be my favorite anime. Animated movies: *The Lion King* (basically I watched every Disney movie religiously). *Princess Mononoke* was my first Miyazaki film — I chose it from a Blockbuster shelf because the movie quote on the cover said "the animated *Star Wars*!" *Toy Story* was the first film I ever watched that made me feel like the movie knew more about what I was like than I did.

Best advice: The best advice I can give is to learn how to keep yourself motivated. Start a project, do it, then finish it. The more you do the more you learn. In my opinion, I would say to start by trying to copy a master you look up to. Then once you've mastered that, go beyond that said master.

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2021 RISING STARS



**MEGAN
DONG**

CREATOR/EXECUTIVE PRODUCER

CENTAURWORLD

SUMMER 2021



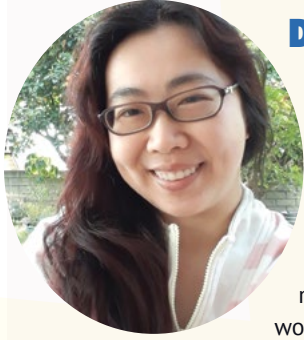
**MATTHEW
YAMADA**

PRODUCTION DESIGNER

BACK TO THE OUTBACK

FALL 2021





Dou Hong

Model Supervisor, *Young Justice: Phantoms* [Warner Bros. Animation]

Stats: 31, from Cincinnati, Ohio.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: It was a relatively late decision; I was already a junior in college, working as an intern. My boss mentioned that my work would easily fit into the animation world, which I had never seriously pursued. His words made me re-evaluate my trajectory and in addition to my automotive design major, I began to take the animation career seriously with personal side projects.

First job: Social media was a burgeoning platform around the mid-2000s, and I began posting my art online. I communicated with a few people in the industry who were able to help point me in the right direction and promote my work. My big break was during college. Cartoon Network hired me to work on *Ben 10 Omniverse*, which was an absolute blast. What I learned on that show and networking allowed me to eventually move to other studios like Nickelodeon and Warner Bros. Animation.

What I love about working on the show: I love working on *YJ* because I was allowed to be more involved than just design. I was able to sit in during episode handouts with overseas as well as ink and paint meetings. Working with the showrunners Greg Weisman and Brandon Vietti to establish the current season's design and hearing their ideas on developing stories and motivations was amazing. It constantly blows my mind that I'm the model supervisor for a show that I loved to watch in college. My connection to the show went full circle, and I am so proud to be here.

Toughest part: The toughest part about animation for me is actually not the job itself. I use a lot of creativity when I'm working, and sometimes I don't have the energy to work on personal stuff after. It's a bit difficult to work on fun side things if the time and energy are not there. It's a fine balance of making sure you're doing the most for your current project but also maintaining the passion that got you there in the first place.

Favorite toons growing up: Anything related to superheroes is my jam, and I have a special affinity for anything related to DC comics (*Teen Titans*, *Justice League*, *Green Lantern the Animated Series*). Musical films (anything Disney, *Swan Princess*, *Quest for Camelot*, *Anastasia*) are also a favorite of mine, as well as shonen anime (*Ultimate Muscle*, *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, *Jojo's Bizarre Adventure*)

Best advice: Embrace your passion and be proud of your work. My passion for art led me into a career that I love and an industry that's always innovating. Don't be afraid to post your work online and be open about what you like. Animation is a visually-based medium, so opening yourself and your art to others will give you greater chances of being seen. Loving what you do definitely helps.



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VALTERI HEINONEN

AND ALL OF
ANIMATION MAGAZINE'S
2021 RISING STARS!

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Grace Kum

Visual Development, *Stillwater* [Gaumont/Apple TV+]

Stats: 28, born and raised in L.A.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when:

It was quite early on. I joke about how I give fault to my dad for buying me hundreds of VHS tapes and the coveted Black Diamond Disney collection for me since I was a wee kid. Including things like *Candy Candy*, *Future Boy Conan*, *The Rose of Versailles*, *Sherlock Hound*,

Rain, and so much classic anime, I was fed a lot of different kinds of media as a kid onward (I was a *Lord of the Rings* nut).

First job: I was surrounded by some of the best and kindest instructors and an all-star group of best friends during my time at Art Center and we were in a very giving group setting where we would update each other with advice and news on different gig openings. My instructors had also helped us so much in updating us on any places that were looking. I ended up landing a storyboarding/prop design test for Disney TV's *Big Hero 6* series.

What I love about working on the show: I got to draw *so many animals*. Who doesn't love drawing cute animals in cute clothing?! I believe the biggest plus for me was the team and people I had gotten to work with on this production. Alex Soto, our executive producer, and Tommy Kim, our art director, were such a huge support and guidance to the team work. Every production is a small family so it was a blessing to be able to have people who were willing to check in on each other. Sunshine and rainbows would be ideal,

but it's fun to have people you can sprint with together down Sunset Blvd. with a Cintiq pen in one hand and a cup of boba tea in the other.

Toughest part: Probably tackling the sheer number of characters along with cultural and animal research that had to be applied. We were on the clock, as is the state of most series productions. I cannot stress how grateful I was to have had my character assistant, Sophia Chen, come on to help keep me afloat and wailing with me on the cushy beanbags of our offices. Lin Huang, a visual development artist, was my officemate and partner in crime in this journey and we were there to witness all of our ups and downs on the job.

Fave toons growing up: Of course I grew up with the usual Disney/Pixar/DreamWorks, but I do have to say that I have a special place and memory for all the Ghibli films and all the work that had come out of Studio Bones. I was the kid who would stay up past bedtime to watch shows on adult swim such as *Detective Conan*, *Wolf's Rain*, *Paranoia Agent* and *Ghost in the Shell*. I highly doubt kid me could understand what was going on fully, but I did manage to recognize early on the diversity of what film is capable of. I have the trifecta of nerdiness with *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* burned into my DNA as well!

Best advice: I would advise everyone to go at the pace that suits them the most. Have fun with the work. Just like how we take different supplements and vitamins to keep us healthy, we need a balance of study, hobby, self-care, art and leisure to keep yourself going for as long as we can. Don't worry at all about having to nail a style that will emerge over time based on the things you like and enjoy. You can always grow out of a method and style and that is how you build yourself up to create work that suits you the best.

Hilda Has Been Nominated for Three Annie Awards!

Congratulations to the teams at Mercury Filmworks, Silvergate, and Netflix.

Best TV/Media - Children
Chapter 9: The Deerfox

Best Character Animation - TV/Media
David Laliberté

Best Editorial - TV/Media
John McKinnon
Chapter 9: The Deerfox



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Christina LaFerla

CG Supervisor, *Big Nate* [Nickelodeon]

Stats: 36, from Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I have always been passionate about cartoons, games and technology. As a kid, I was either making movies with my friends or playing on the computer. Being good with computers allowed me to put my passions together and get into CG animation.

First job in animation: Thanks to a college alumni, I was able to intern at Nickelodeon Movies on the Paramount lot in 2006. I used every opportunity during my internship to work hard, network, learn and tour other studios to meet with recruiters. Before graduation, I was sending Nickelodeon recruiters monthly emails letting them know I was open to any opportunity that was available in order to get my foot in the door. My persistence paid off and I was hired on as a production assistant for one of Nick's first CG TV shows, *Tak and the Power of Juju*, shortly after graduation.

What I love about working on *Big Nate*: Adapting a 2D comic into a CG world is a group effort. I love that I get to be a part of each step in the CG animation pipeline. We have an awesome crew and I'm able to work with writers, designers, board team and directors, modelers, look development, animators, lighting and compositing teams as well as our vendor studio teams in India. It's great to see a script come to life in CG after months and months of teamwork.

Toughest part: Building a team and starting a brand new show from home during a pandemic brings new challenges. I have found that communication with my team as well as with our team in India has been essential in keeping our show moving forward.

Favorite toons growing up: I never missed an episode of *The Simpsons* after school. I loved Disney classics, like *Sword in the Stone* and *The Lion King*, but once *Toy Story* and *Monsters, Inc.* came out, I knew I wanted to work in CG.

Best advice: I was probably obnoxious, calling people, writing people, emailing companies I liked for any opportunity they'd give me. If I watched a cartoon I liked on TV, I'd go to their website and email them about an internship. I was annoying, but it got me to where I am today.



Katie Lyons

Development Designer, *Odo* [Sixteen South]

Stats: 28, from Dublin, currently living in Belfast.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I honestly don't think I ever wanted to do anything else! I was basically born holding a pencil – drawing and creating is just something I've done my whole life. As a kid it was always going to be a toss-up between becoming an artist or becoming a professional biscuit-taster ... My uncle also works in the industry and it's definitely thanks to him that I've always been kind of immersed in animation.

First job: Coming out of college I worked on a variety of short projects before ever setting foot in an actual studio. It was a really helpful way to build up my portfolio while also applying to any animation jobs I came across. I actually count working as a background designer on *Claude* for Sixteen South, as my first 'proper' animation job where I was on the whole series as a designer from start to finish.

What I love about my job: My favorite thing about *Odo* is that it's basically a soup of all of the best things – wholesome stories, stunning artwork and the sweetest cast of characters you could ever ask for! When I was in college, I worked for two summers as a camp counselor up in Maine and there are so many moments in the episodes that remind me of my own little campers. All I've ever wanted is to be a part of a show that does *good*, that helps bring goodness to the world. There's something kind of amazing about helping to create a show that will hopefully instill such a special message.

The toughest part: The toughest part is also one of my favorite parts – working on so many different projects at the same time (usually around five or six!) you really have to learn how to juggle between a variety of design styles and stories.

Favorite toons growing up: Growing up in a house without a TV, cartoons were a treat saved exclusively for summer holidays and the occasional sick day spent on the couch down at my Nana's. As a child of the '90s, we were completely spoilt for choice with animated shows – *The Rugrats*, *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Dexter's Laboratory*, *Hey Arnold!*, *Recess* and *As Told by Ginger* are a few favorites. We also had the odd VHS tape lying around, my absolute favorites being *The Brave Little Toaster* and (even though it scared me silly!) Disney's *The Black Cauldron*.

Best advice: Absorb *everything*! Working in development is all about ideas. It doesn't matter if those ideas are beautiful backgrounds you draw, or scenes that you write – the most brilliant ideas come from what we know best! Read things, watch films, go for walks, observe those around you. Take in the art of the every-day. Write down or sketch-out your ideas as they come and capture even the tiniest things that you find interesting. You never know what is one day going to be useful! Be kind, make nice art ... that's all you really need.

SONY PICTURES
ANIMATION

CONGRATULATES WENDELL DALIT



vivo

ART DIRECTOR

**HONOREE • ANIMATION MAGAZINE'S
RISING STARS • 2021**



Beatriz Martin

Character Animator, *The Snoopy Show* [WildBrain Studios]

Stats: 39, born in Madrid, currently living in Vancouver.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I do not remember a time when I was not drawing and inventing my own stories, but fine arts (or anything creative really) was frowned upon as a career, so since I was also interested in science, I ended up attending medical school. In the U.S., I also discovered improv theater and was immediately drawn to the thrill of instant collaborative storytelling and acting, and the (crazy) idea of mixing story with drawing and pursuing a career in animation started to take shape.

First job: After finishing animation school, I was unable to find an entry-level job as an animator or get a story internship. One day, my school organized an industry night for recent graduates, and although I did not feel motivated to attend, I did, and had the opportunity to meet Nadine Westerbarkey, animation director of *My Little Pony: The Movie*. She had seen my student short film but what she enjoyed the most and we ended chatting about the animal sketches and studies I had been drawing around Maplewood Farm, Granville Island. Because of my on-locations sketches, I was invited to take a test and shortly after, I joined WildBrain.

What I love about working on *The Snoopy Show*: I did not grow up with *Peanuts*, so I have been enjoying a second childhood. The stories are engaging, super fun and witty, and the characters are simply endearing. I particularly love the friendship between Snoopy and Woodstock and how much they express with no words. I like how honest and sincere the stories are, with no hint of sarcasm nor cynicism. I feel very fortunate that I can work with super fun, creative and supportive people.

The toughest part: I often find myself overcomplicating things, but I think this is just how I am as a person. Being on model is very important for such an iconic show. I am very fortunate to have an incredible supervisor and team, so every struggle feels like a learning opportunity.

Favorite toons growing up: I grew up watching (and singing along to) Disney animated films on VHS and wanting to be a mermaid with long hair. I also loved *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *All Dogs Go to Heaven*. Some animated TV shows I remember fondly were: *The Littles*, *Captain Tsubasa*, *Once upon a Time... Life*, *David the Gnome* and *Around the World with Willy Fog*.

Sound advice: When I was younger, I was very worried about choosing the right path, and did not know where to even start. Today I worry less, because I know there is time for everything. Every single experience adds up and will make your portfolio and artistic style unique. Luck happens, but hard work, perseverance and passion eventually lead to new opportunities.



Antoine Rota

Director, *Billy the Cowboy Hamster* [Dandeloo]

Stats: 34, from "a little village in the fabulous mountains of Switzerland."

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I've always wanted to draw, but to my family drawing is not a profession. They still don't understand what I'm doing.

First job: It was at Cube Creative on the French TV series *Kaeloo*. I started at Cube Creative as a storyboarder and a few months later I became co-director of the show. I think I only got it because I looked like a nice guy (and maybe also thanks to just a little bit of hard work).

What I love about working on the show: Our team is great! It's always nice to work with people you can have a laugh (and a beer) with. When Dandeloo presented me with the project, I loved the touch of absurdity that Catharina Valckx (author of the books) wove into the tone. On the graphic part I also love that her skies are pink not blue, the grass is yellow not green, etc. – it's different from the norm. And though I didn't really care much about hamsters before (they're too small), I do love cowboys. So, I hope my nephews will watch Billy and his friends in the mornings, eating their cereal, just as I watched my favorite shows as a kid.

Toughest part: The fact that we must have planning. And, we do have to respect it. The job of a director comes with a lot of work, and it can sometimes be hard to do everything in the right timing.

Fave toons growing up: *Mickey Mouse* cartoons.

Best advice: Regarding the storyboards, many newbies tend to think that they have to deliver something perfectly clean. I think it's better to give and put in as many intentions as you can, rather than having clean drawings. One thing for me that is important to remember is that we're doing animation projects! With mostly great and nice people! There's no point in stressing out too much.



Eastwood Wong

Art Director, *The Proud Family: Louder and Prouder* [Disney Channel]

Stats: 32, born in San Francisco, raised in L.A.

I knew I wanted to work in animation: When I watched *Sailor Moon* and found out that someone's job was to draw her.

First job in animation: When I graduated from Art Center College of Design, I was lucky and had the opportunity to intern at Pixar. After the internship was over, they hired me as a sketch artist to help with various *Toy Story* and *Cars* shorts.

What I love about my job: It's so exciting to work on a show I grew up watching and love! I get to work with a fun, collaborative and diverse crew and also contribute to the meaningful storylines that are being told on the show. It also feels super surreal to work with [series creator] Bruce Smith. During meetings, we get to watch him give animation notes and do draw-overs and it's like attending a master class for free!

The toughest part: The schedule of TV animation can be very demanding and it is important to check in with yourself mentally and physically. If things get too much it's okay to ask for support from your production.

Favorite toons growing up: *Sailor Moon*, *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, *The Little Mermaid*, *Pokémon*, *Ratatouille*, *The Incredibles*.

Best advice: Draw and paint what you like, stay true to your aesthetic and your true self and your art will follow.



Michael Yamada

Production Designer, *Back to the Outback* [Netflix Animation]

Stats: 41, from Pasadena, Calif.

I knew I wanted to work in animation when: I was studying industrial design in college and saw *Lilo & Stitch* in theaters. I really connected with the heart and emotion in that movie along with all the cool spaceships, and beautiful backgrounds. It flipped a switch in my brain – "I want to work on something like that!"

First job: I was lucky enough to be taking a visual development class my last term of college. Both my teachers were art directors at DreamWorks and we all idolized them. Breaking into animation was my five-year goal and I was surprised when one of my teachers asked for a copy of my portfolio and I started working on his movie a month after graduation.

What I love about the job: Australia is such a diverse and beautiful place. It's like a mini-vacation each time we design a new set or learn about a new location in the movie. We've done such a deep dive that google thinks we live there!

Toughest part: For me, it's balancing out short-term and long-term goals. There's always a lot to do every day, but you really need to know where your input can make the most impact on the project. Moviemaking is tough, but it works out if you plan for those difficult days.

Fave toons growing up: *Robin Hood*, *The Secret of NIMH*, *DuckTales*.

Best advice: Invest in learning about all the different parts of filmmaking as well as your skills as an artist. Making a movie is definitely a collaborative process and that broad understanding helps you best communicate the vision and intent of your director(s). ♦

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Past Perfect: From left, Tom Kenny and Cloris Leachman; ASIFA president Sue Shakespeare, Bill Farmer and Margaret Kerry, ASIFA exec director Frank Gladstone and Klaus director Sergio Pablos. (Photos: David Yeh)

Expect the Unexpected!

Our friends at the Annie Awards give us the scoop on this month's virtual ceremony.

While Los Angeles begins to loosen its COVID-19 restrictions, the organizers of this year's Annie Awards are planning an unforgettable virtual edition of the annual event which honors the year's best animation.

"Shifting our awards ceremony to a virtual format has been challenging, but exciting," says ASIFA-Hollywood president Sue Shakespeare. "It's given us the opportunity to reimagine how we recognize the fantastic talent intrinsic to our industry and the amazingly creative projects produced by so many."

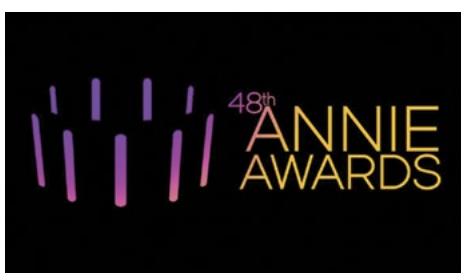
Shakespeare, who is also the president of L.A.-based Creative Capers Ent. design and animation studio, promises a virtual ceremony that will be different and new. "It will likely be shorter than a live ceremony, and while there won't be the terrific parties before and after, it will be heartfelt, funny, moving and representative of our community. A great benefit of going virtual is that more members of our worldwide community will be able to participate."

As ASIFA-Hollywood exec director Frank Gladstone tells us, "The virtual show will be about 90 minutes long. As anyone who has attended the Annies knows about half hour of the live show is just people walking to the stage, so that's why the taped presentation will be shorter."

Gladstone points out that all 154 of the nominees are sending in recorded acceptance videos while only 31 will actually get the award. He adds, "I have seen some of them already and they are terrific. We also have some animation produced for the show by Six Point Harness and some great graphics by Russell Frazier who helps us out every year."

Adds Jerry Beck, ASIFA-Hollywood's vice president, "The Annies will be particularly special this year because we all spent our working hours in our little home studios. The virtual Annies this year give us all a reason to come together to raise a glass of champagne and welcome the return to normalcy."

Since the world came to rely on animation



more than ever in 2020, ASIFA received over 2,000 submissions for Annie consideration — a number much higher than previous years. "Early on, we worried that we could see a serious reduction in our voting numbers this year, but that was not the case at all; our membership numbers have remained on par and even nudged up a bit," Shakespeare points out. "This exemplifies ASIFA-Hollywood's resilience and strong support from the animation community. This is something we never take for granted."

One thing that sets the Annies apart from other awards shows is that it has two different best animated feature categories — one dedicated to "studio" releases and the other to indies. Shakespeare says the organization had to re-evaluate how to make this determination this year, because in previous years the distinction was made by the size of theatrical distribution.

"Last year we began accepting streamed-only productions in the independent category, so this year we expanded that to the feature category as well," explains Shakespeare.

This year, ASIFA relied on the studios and distributors to submit in the category they felt was most appropriate, with the proviso that the org would have the right to move a project if they thought the submission belonged in the other category. "I'm happy to be able to report that, while this certainly was not an exact science, it worked out well," says Shakespeare.

Both Shakespeare and Beck point out that it has been a surprisingly good year for animation, despite the fact that theaters were closed for the

most part. "It turns out we have a real race, which I admit I wasn't sure we would 12 months ago," says Beck. "All the Annie (and Academy) nominees are truly worthy of an award. Who will win? I can't wait to find out myself."

Outreach, Preservation, Scholarship and More

Despite the pandemic, ASIFA-Hollywood has had a very busy year, presenting 60 events, including screenings, panels and Q&As for its members. As Shakespeare tells us, "While continuing our charitable initiatives through our Animation Aid Foundation, we established a special COVID relief fund to assist our members in need. The Animation Educator's Forum (AEF) awarded in excess of \$50,000 in student scholarships and faculty grants, and we're currently initiating a new round for 2021. Through our preservation initiatives, we saved a lost *Betty Boop* short and were instrumental in facilitating the donation of a major collection of *Akira* production art into the (AMPAS) Academy Archives. We are also starting a new endeavor with the UCLA Film & TV Archive which will save at least four films this year.

"Finally, as this pandemic year has revealed some of the systemic problems simmering beneath the surface in our country, it has also brought about a recognition of these problems within our own industry. We are considering ways ASIFA can help address these problems, in some tangible, concrete, sustainable way. One early effort was to open our Annie Award nomination judging applications to members outside of ASIFA, inviting Women In Animation, Black N' Animated, LXiA, Native American and Asian organizations to participate in the process. This year, more than half of our nomination judges were industry members from outside of our general membership."

For more info about the event, visit annieawards.org.

Major Categories at a Glance

Here are the nominees in some of the major categories of the 48th Annie Awards:

Best Feature

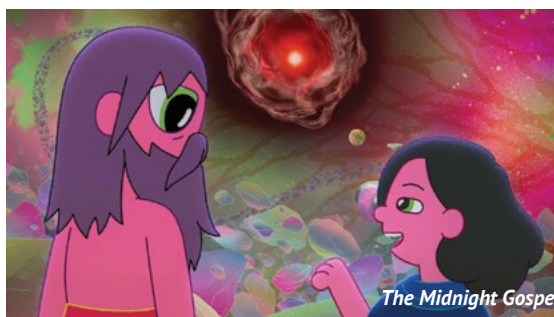
Onward (Pixar)
Soul (Pixar)
The Croods: A New Age (DreamWorks)
The Willoughbys (Netflix/BRON/Creative Wealth)
Trolls World Tour (DreamWorks)



Close Enough

Best Indie Feature

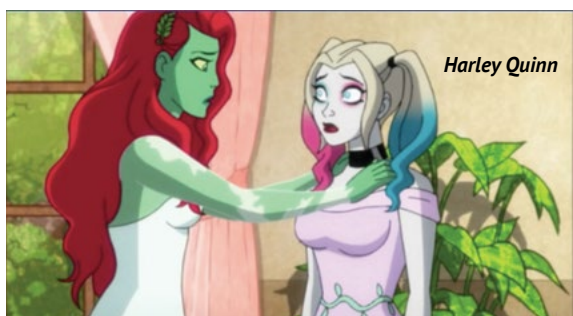
A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon (StudioCanal/Aardman/Anton Capital/Netflix)
Calamity Jane (Maybe Movies)
On-Gaku: Our Sound (Rock'n Roll Mountain/Tip Top)
Ride Your Wave (Science SARU)
Wolfwalkers (Cartoon Saloon/Melusine/Apple/GKIDS)



The Midnight Gospel

Best Direction: Features

Calamity Jane (Rémi Chayé)
Over the Moon (Glen Keane)
Ride Your Wave (Masaaki Yuasa)
Soul (Pete Docter, Kemp Powers)
Wolfwalkers (Tomm Moore, Ross Stewart)



Harley Quinn

Best Special Production

Baba Yaga (Baobab)
Libresse / Bodyform - #WombStories (Chelsea Pictures)
Nixie & Nimbo (Hornet)
Shoom's Odyssey (Picolo Pictures)
The Snail and the Whale (Magic Light Pictures)



Rick and Morty

Best Short Subject

Filles Bleues, Peur Blanche (Miyu)
KKUM (Open the Portal)
Souvenir Souvenir (Blast Production)
The Places Where We Live: Cake (FX Productions)
World of Tomorrow Episode Three (Don Hertzfeldt)



Genndy Tartakovsky's Primal

Best TV/Media: Preschool

Buddi, "Snow" (Unanico)
Muppet Babies, "Wock-a-bye-Fozzie" (Oddbot/Disney Junior)
Stillwater, "The Impossible Dream/Stuck in the Rain" (Apple/Gaumont/Scholastic)
The Adventures of Paddington, "Paddington Digs a Tunnel to Peru" (Blue-Zoo, Nickelodeon)
Xavier Riddle and the Secret Movie: I Am Madam President (9 Story/ Brown Bag Films)

Best TV/Media: Children

Hilda, "Chapter 9: The Deerfox" (Silvergate, Netflix)
Rise of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, "Finale Part 4: Rise" (Nickelodeon)
She-Ra and the Princesses of Power, "Heart Part 2" (DreamWorks)
Star Wars: The Clone Wars, "Shattered" (Lucasfilm Animation)
Victor and Valentino, "The Lonely Haunts Club 3: La Llorona" (Cartoon Network)

Best TV/Media: General Audience

Close Enough, "Logan's Run'd/Room Parents" (Cartoon Network)
Genndy Tartakovsky's Primal, "Coven of the Damned" (Cartoon Network)
Harley Quinn, "Something Borrowed, Something Green" (Eshugadee Prods, Warner Bros.)
Rick and Morty, "The Vat of Acid Episode" (Rick & Morty LLC)
The Midnight Gospel, "Mouse of Silver" (Titmouse, Netflix)

Juried Awards

The Winsor McCay Award:

Willie Ito, Sue Nichols and Bruce Smith.

The June Foray Award:

Daisuke "Dice" Tsutsumi.

The Ub Iwerks Award:

Epic Games for its Unreal Engine

Special Achievement Award

Howard (Directed by Don Hahn)



Your 2021 Animation and VFX Oscar Ballot!

Congratulations to all the talented nominees of this year's Academy Awards:

Best Animated Feature:

- Onward.** Director: Dan Scanlon. (Pixar/Disney)
- Over the Moon.** Glen Keane. (Netflix/Pearl)
- A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon.** Will Becher, Richard Phelan. (Aardman/Netflix)
- Soul.** Pete Docter, Kemp Powers. (Pixar/Disney)
- Wolfwalkers.** Tomm Moore, Ross Stewart. (Cartoon Saloon/Apple/GKIDS)

Best Animated Short:

- Burrow.** Madeline Sharafian, Michael Capbarat. (Pixar)
- Genius Loci.** Adrien Merigeau, Amaury Ovisé. (Kazak Production)
- If Anything Happens I Love You.** Michael Gover, Will McCormack. (Netflix)
- Opera.** Erick Oh. (Beast and Natives Alike)
- Yes-People.** Gísli Darri Halldórsson, Arnar Gunnarsson. (CAOZ)

Best Visual Effects:

- Love and Monsters.** Matt Sloan, Genevieve Camilleri, Matt Everitt and Brian Cox. (Paramount)
- The Midnight Sky.** Matthew Kasmir, Christopher Lawrence, Max Solomon and David Watkins. (Netflix)
- Mulan.** Sean Faden, Anders Langlands, Seth Maury and Steve Ingram. (Disney)
- The One and Only Ivan.** Nick Davis, Greg Fisher, Ben Jones and Santiago Colomo Martinez. (Disney)
- Tenet.** Andrew Jackson, David Lee, Andrew Lockley and Scott Fisher. (Warner Bros.)

Soul was also nominated in the

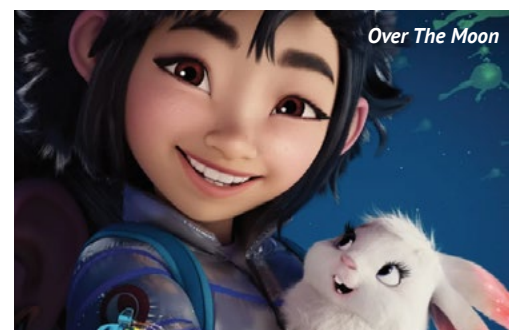
- Best Score** (Trent Reznor, Atticus Ross and Jon Batiste) and
- Best Sound** (Coya Elliott, Ren Klyce, David Parker and Vince Caro) categories.



A Shaun the Sheep Movie: Farmageddon



Soul

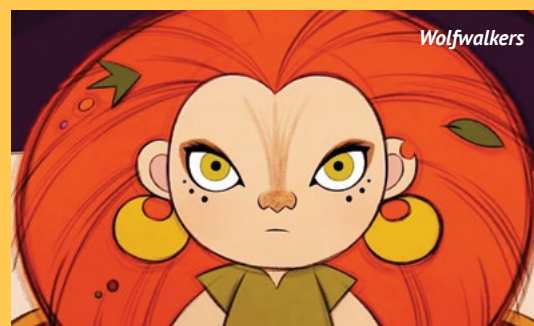


Over The Moon



Onward

Last year, Disney/Pixar's *Toy Story 4* took home the Oscar for Best Animated Feature and the prize for Best Animated Short went to *Hair Love* (Matthew Cherry and Karen Rupert Tolliver). *1917* was the winner of the Best Visual Effects Oscar. The 93rd Oscars will be broadcast Sunday, April 25 at 5 p.m. (PT) on ABC. Visit oscars.org for additional information.



Wolfwalkers

FINALLY, an In-Person Animation Event!



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A Head for World Domination

Patton Oswalt and Jordan Blum tell us everything we need to know about their much-anticipated *M.O.D.O.K.* show.

If you thought Disney+'s *WandaVision* was a wild ride, get ready for the delightful insanity of the new *Marvel's M.O.D.O.K.* series. Since his first appearance in the 1967 issue of *Tales of Suspense*, the frustrated, insane supervillain M.O.D.O.K. has left a big impression on fans of the Marvel universe. Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, M.O.D.O.K. (Mental Organism Designed Only for Killing) is always coming up with futile schemes to bring down the likes of Captain America, Iron Man, Deadpool, Ms. Marvel and The Hulk. The deeply insecure character is finally getting the respect he thinks he deserves when he appears in own show on Hulu in May.

Exec produced by the dynamic duo of writer Jordan Blum (*American Dad!*) and everyone's favorite writer/comic/actor/awards show host Patton Oswalt (*Ratatouille*), not only is the show incredibly funny, it also features terrific stop-motion animation by the cool crew at Stoopid Buddy Stoodios (*Robot Chicken*). "I always wanted to work in this world of subterranean D-list heroes and villains of the Marvel universe," says Oswalt, who also voices the main character. "For me, the thing that was most exciting was being able to mess around in the weird side alleys of this world as well as make the main character somewhat human and relatable, as we also explore his home life with his wife and kids."

Blum says he had been wanting to work with Oswalt for a long time. The two had previously collaborated on a pilot for FOX, so when Blum had a meeting with the folks at Marvel, he jumped at the chance to get Oswalt involved again. "He has the perfect voice and spoke the language of superheroes," says

Blum. "They always say never meet your heroes, but in Patton's case, it was the exact opposite. He is such an amazing and incredible collaborator. We both have this great love for comic books. In fact, we always ran into each other in comic stores around town."

Let the Game Begin

Blum and Oswalt joined forces to develop and build their *M.O.D.O.K.* series and things got rolling when Marvel and Hulu bought

their package two years ago. "After we wrote the pilot and show bible, we had to figure out the look of the show, so we got several presentations from different animation studios."

The duo says they were blown away by what Stoopid Buddy put together. "They actually did two versions, the first one was standard 2D animation, and the other was stop-motion," says Blum. "Not only did their stop-motion version stand out, it also incorporated some native, hand-held, verité camera style that was



"What's surprising is the show has a ton of heart although it's about a floating head! In a way, it's a relatable story about a very driven person who has lost his way. He loses his business and his family in his 40s and has to rediscover what he wants out of life."

— Exec producer Jordan Blum



He Gets No Respect: Patton Oswalt writes and stars in the new show featuring Marvel's misanthropic bad guy M.O.D.O.K.

unlike anything else I had seen before. It was cinematic, had great craftsmanship and made great use of depth of field and camera movements. It looked like something Laika would do. It's a very crowded market for animation, and you really need to have a distinctive style that doesn't get lost in the shuffle."

Fortunately, the production began before the COVID shutdown last year, so they were able to get a good part of the job done. Afterwards, health precautions were put into place at the studio. The dailies and post work was done remotely. "They had to bring in a safety specialist at the studio and everyone was tested weekly," says Blum. "There are 30 mini-stages at Stoopid Buddy, and we had only one or two puppeteers working at the same time, and then the camera crew would check in. The work was slower, but everything was beautifully crafted."

The design team had to build hundreds of elaborate sets that represented the wild universe of the main character and the Marvel superheroes. "A lot of the show was written before we knew it was going to be a stop-motion project, but the team at the studio really embraced the challenges," says Blum. "The sets are really works of art. They had to build places like Asgard and Murderworld, and the scale of these worlds are unbelievable. You actually forget that you're watching a stop-motion show."

In addition to Oswald, the series features a terrific voice cast that includes Aimee Garcia (wife Jodie), Melissa Fumero (daughter Melissa), Ben Schwartz (son Lou), Wendi McLendon-Covey (mad scientist Monica Rappaccini), Beck Bennet (young techy boss Austin Van Der Sleet), Jon Daly (snarky android Super-Adaptoid) and Sam Richardson (loyal henchman Gary). Blum mentions, "It was so much fun to see our main voice cast and guest stars' take on the Marvel universe characters and to see the A-list Marvel characters in the same physical space as the M.O.D.O.K. players."

Oswald, who is a huge comic-book and animation fan, says he loved Stoopid Buddy's attention to detail on the show. "I love the fact that we could pack so much in 3D in every frame, and we could hide things behind each other," he notes. "We could use deep focus and have visuals that look like it was shot by a hand-held camera for a documentary film. Animation allowed us to have some massive set pieces with plenty of collisions. You can also bring out vocal performances that might get lost in a live-action piece."

The writer/actor/exec producer says he got a big kick out of exploring the domestic side of M.O.D.O.K.. "He has this huge ego that



Terrible Teen:
M.O.D.O.K.'s
17-year-old
daughter (voiced
by Melissa Fumero)
resembles her dad
in a big way!



"As an actor, the big challenge was to find these moments when M.O.D.O.K. shows his vulnerable human side — although he is this screeching half-robotic monstrosity!"

— Exec producer/actor **Patton Oswalt**

thinks he can rule the world and enjoy a family life in his own twisted way," says Oswald. "He thinks his wife and kids are another way of showing off his might. But he really loves them, and he's about to go through some serious ups and downs throughout the show."

A Relatable Floating Head

According to Oswald, the toughest part of the job was keeping his inner Marvel geek in line. "I had this knee-jerk reaction to pack as many Marvel Easter eggs and fun references as possible in every episode," he admits. "Luckily, Jordan was there to wrangle me when my brain was getting ahead of me. As an actor, the big challenge was to find these moments when M.O.D.O.K. shows his vulnerable human side — although he is this screeching half-robotic monstrosity!"

For Blum, the show was a chance to learn a whole new side of animation beyond the 2D world of *American Dad!*. "There was a whole new set of tools to learn," he says. "In 2D TV animation, you have a lot of chances to change things during the animatic, reading, color stages, etc. but with stop-motion you have to lock everything early on. It's more like live action than animation."

Blum says the show's writers room was made up of a tight-knit group of eight who connected and bonded quickly. "It was a lot of fun to find the show with our diverse staff as

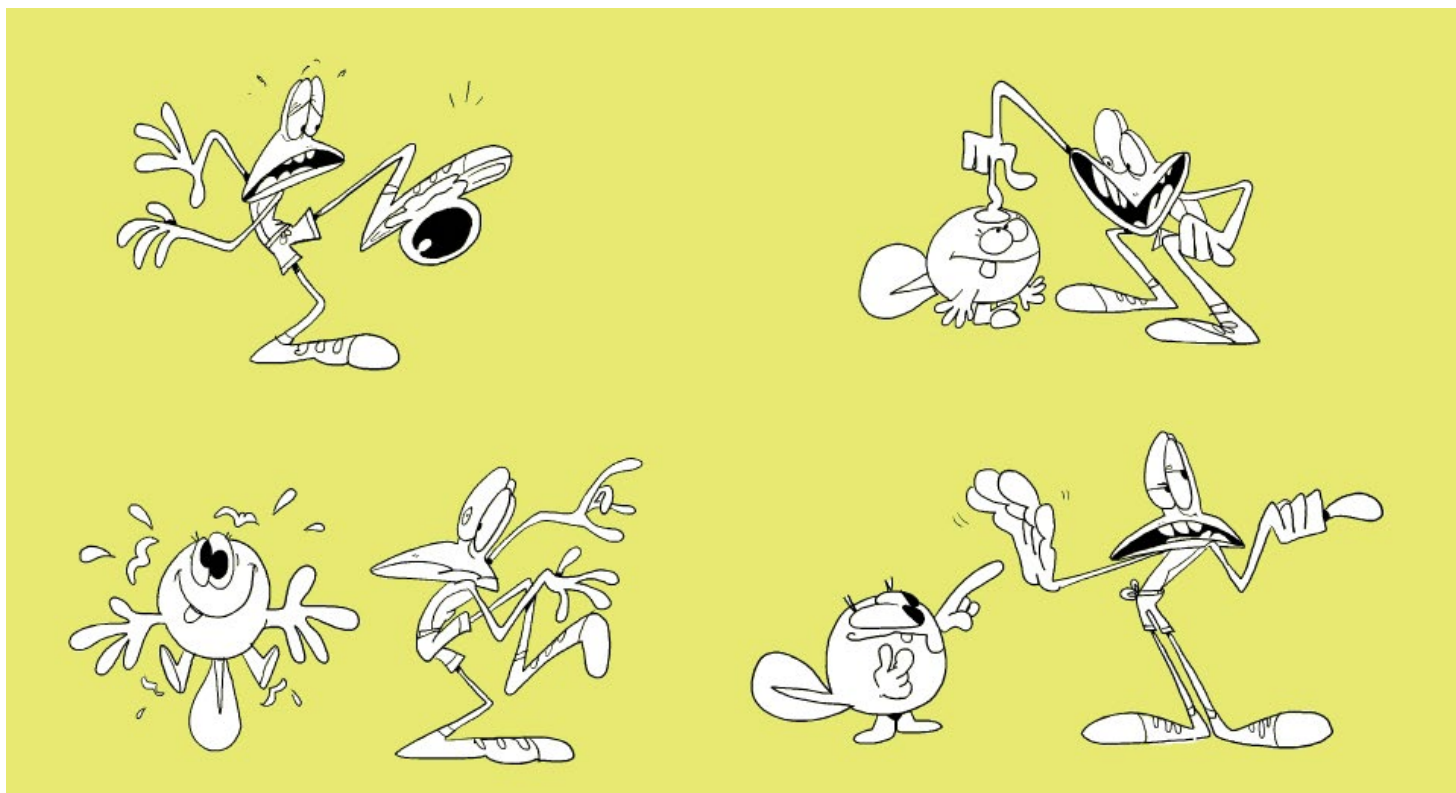
they brought their own stories to the table," he notes. "What's surprising is the show has a ton of heart although it's about a floating head! In a way, it's a relatable story about a very driven person who has lost his way. He loses his business and his family in his 40s and has to rediscover what he wants out of life."

He adds, "Stan Lee and Jack Kirby infused all the characters in this universe with so much humanity and relatability. That's why we are even able to see a lot of ourselves in M.O.D.O.K., who is this frustrated, ego-driven person who is essentially humbled. That's the reason these characters have lasted for over 60 years."

Both Blum and Oswald are hoping that audiences will have a great time investing in the show's offbeat characters. "I think they'll have a great time with the comedy and the emotional relevance of the show," says Blum. "We hope they go on this serialized adventure with M.O.D.O.K. and his family. Things are messy and don't get resolved at the end of each episode, and in fact, the first season ends with a pretty huge cliffhanger!"

"Like all Marvel projects, we have this combination of fun and surprise: We hope the audience is surprised by all the human zigzags we put into it," says Oswald, sounding like a very crafty world dominator! ♦

The first season of *Marvel's M.O.D.O.K.* (10 episodes) premieres on Hulu on May 21.



Sibling Slapstick

Pencilmation creator Ross Bollinger sharpens his next big toon *Gil Next Door*.

Those who've been following YouTube's wild world of animation are familiar with Ross Bollinger and his hugely popular 2D animated series and channel *Pencilmation*. The snappy, dialogue-free toon, which features simple animated characters and slapstick situations, has entertained over 18 million subscribers since it was first introduced in June of 2009. After delivering 512 episodes of his hit web-series, the New York-based creator is getting ready to launch a new animated show, called *Gil Next Door*, which will be more along the lines of TV toons such as *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Rocko's Modern Life*.

"We started thinking about the premise of the new show about a year ago," says Bollinger during a recent phone call. "There are lots of shows about two best friends, but we started playing around with the older brother-younger brother dynamic. I have a younger brother who is six years my junior, so there's some gap between us, and when you have that much age difference between siblings, you sometimes get a little bit of a parent-child dynamic going on, too. So, we hit upon a frog and a tadpole as a good way of capturing that relation-

ship. Gil for the frog and Wolly for the tadpole."

Bollinger says one thing he loved about *SpongeBob SquarePants* was that the world was such an iconic underwater unit where all the elements really fit in. "I wanted to come up with a fun locale, but everything had already been done!" he notes. "Then, I realized that in the back of my mind that it would be fun to set the show in a world of pet cages and terrariums. I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York, and my wife and I lived in South Philadelphia for a while. So, we set the show in a world

that is condensed mishmash of all these different pet homes, just like a modern city."

Initially, Bollinger and his team of writers tried adapting some of the *Pencilmation* episodes to this new Gil and Wolly world. "*Pencilmation* has no dialogue, so we took an episode where Pencilmate sets out to buy a car and gets swindled into buying a crappy car, and figured out how we could reshape the situation for our characters, with dialogue. As we progressed, we moved away from the old episodes and came up with new situations. We



have an episode, for example, where Gil tries to sneak his brother in a bowl through airport security and ends up leaving him behind at home, which was inspired by *Home Alone*.”

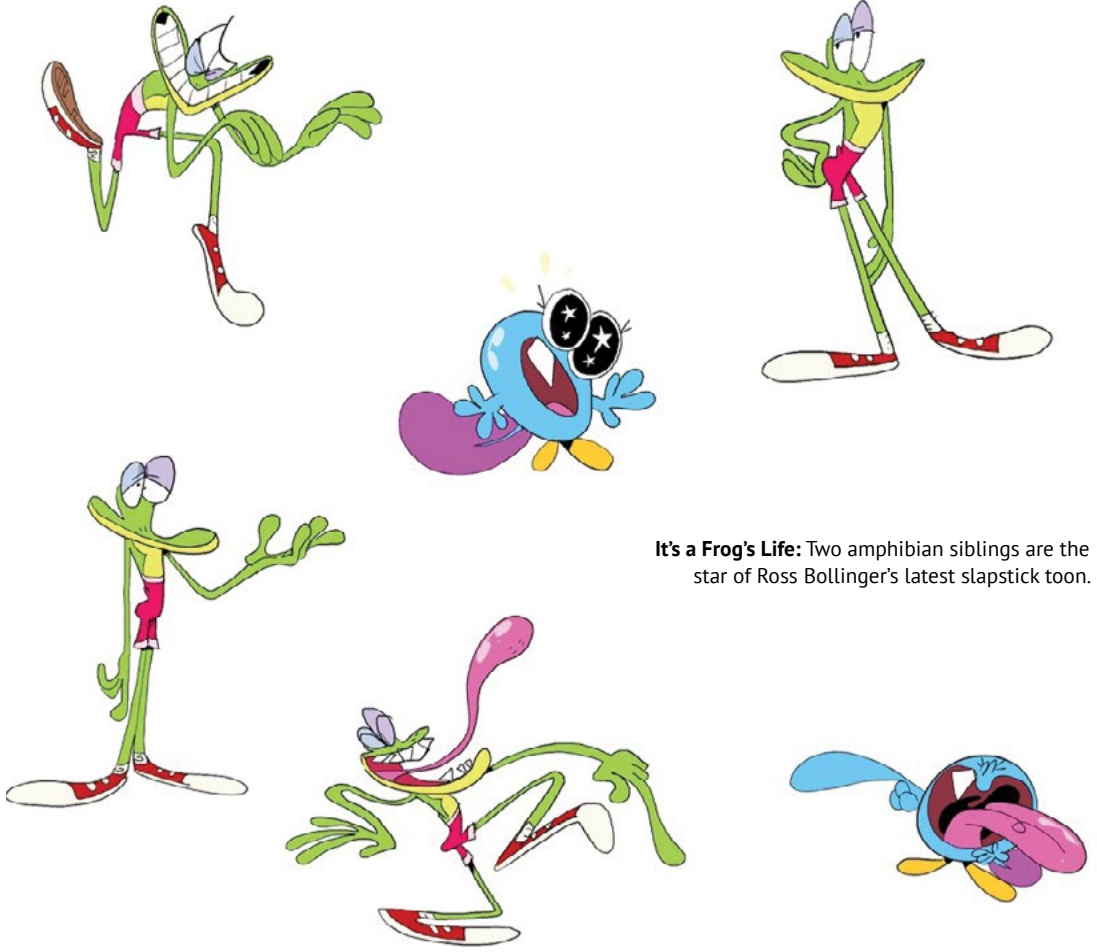
Introducing the Duo to the World

To get the ball rolling, Bollinger is producing 10 x 10-minute episodes of the show. “It’s all self-financed,” he says. “I’m going out on a limb and paying for it, because I want to do it the way I want to do it. It’s not cheap, but I believe that you get a good show when the creator’s vision is not compromised. They were empowered to make the kind of show they originally wanted to make.”

The first season of *Gil Next Door* may debut on YouTube, but Bollinger says he is open to other possibilities as well. He explains, “Our aim is not to make a profit on the first batch of episodes, but to simply get the show in front of people and introduce them to these characters in hopes that they’ll fall in love with them and want to see more. We’re looking at releasing the first episode probably towards the end of summer.”

To voice the main characters on *Gil Next Door*, Bollinger wanted to explore a different kind of path than your usual TV toons. “We scouted quite extensively for our voice actors,” he says. “I wanted to move away from the annoying cartoon guy voice which is ubiquitous. We auditioned lots of people, and one of the actors who really stood out was Cedric Williams (*ThunderCats Roar*), who has a great Will Smith *Fresh Prince* kind of a vibe. He was perfect for the character. For Wolly, we went with an actor who reminded us of a character from *The Goonies*, a boy in a Steven Spielberg movie. The two offered a great contrast.”

Helping Bollinger with his project is Ireland’s Studio Meala and animation director Sean Cunningham. “I knew that my artistic desires had outpaced my business skills, so I realized that we needed outside help beyond my team at *Pencilmation*,” he notes. “I have been a fan of Sean’s work for a long time. We take care of the scripts, storyboards, music, color palettes and concept art, and Studio Meala



It's a Frog's Life: Two amphibian siblings are the star of Ross Bollinger's latest slapstick toon.



“I’m going out on a limb and paying for it, because I want to do it the way I want to do it. It’s not cheap, but I believe that you get a good show when the creator’s vision is not compromised.”

— Series creator **Ross Bollinger**

does the heavy lifting on the animation side. They are great to work with and our process is very interactive. They work with TVPaint which gives the show a traditional animation look. We were going for a paper and ink, tactile style and even emphasized this grainy look in the design. It feels like a playground for the team who are working on the show.”

Bollinger says he has learned a few lessons from his original journey with *Pencilmation*. “One thing I learned is that I spent too much time worrying whether the show was going to work and how much of a success it was going to be,” he admits. “If I could do everything again, I would just relax a little and let everything run its course. You can’t press a button and have a hit song: You can just write the best song you possibly can. The rest is beyond your control. I would also have learned more about managing people. My strategy used to be that as the channel grew in size, I just added more people to the team, so the staff kept growing.”

On the subject of his favorite animated

shows, Bollinger says he loved all the classic stuff — Looney Tunes, Chuck Jones, Tex Avery and Golden Age Disney movies. “They are still running circles around us,” he says. “We have all these technologies and those old movies are still the best animation. Miyazaki is the closest thing to Disney we have in modern times. I also love movies in general: A lot of the classic Hollywood movies: Billy Wilder, Ernst Lubitsch, and maybe more obscurely, I love Bruno Bozzetto’s *Allegro Non Troppo* and Yuri Norstein’s *Hedgehog in the Fog*.”

Finally, we ask Bollinger what he thinks about the massive amount of animation being produced by old-school network and cable entities and the successful streaming entities. “I believe that good stuff always rises to the top,” he says. “We may be buried by the deluge of content, but given enough time, people will remember and keep coming back to what is great.” ♦

See more of Ross Bollinger's work on the *Pencilmation* YouTube channel.



Tales from a Very Cute Friendship

Showrunner Jeroen Jaspaert tells us everything we need to know about Magic Light Pictures/Blue Zoo's new show *Pip and Posy*.



Jeroen Jaspaert

The charming friendship between a mouse and a rabbit is at the heart of the upcoming preschool series *Pip and Posy*. Based on the hugely popular books by Axel Scheffler, this 52 x 7-minute CG-animated show is produced by U.K.'s Magic Light Pictures and Blue Zoo animation studio. We had a chance to chat with the show's Emmy- and Anney prize-winning showrunner **Jeroen Jaspaert** (*Stick Man*, *The Highway Rat*) to find out more about this lovely new offering:

Animag: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved with this new show?

Jeroen Jaspaert: Having worked with Axel Scheffler for many years on our half-hour specials, we'd been aware of *Pip and Posy* since the first picture book release. We liked the characters a lot. They typified the appeal of Scheffler's illustrations; these charming little animal characters, visually enticing stories

and a lot of comedy sneaking onto the pages. It was the perfect inspiration for Magic Light's very first TV series production. The company started to develop the project in 2017 initially working with long-time associates writer/director Max Lang (*The Gruffalo*, *Zog*, *The Snail and the Whale*) and writer/producer Suzanne Lang. Later in the year they were joined by Magic Light's development producer, Vici King.

When did you actually start working on it and how many people work on the production?

I had been at Magic Light to direct *Stick Man* and *The Highway Rat*. It was a great experience working with them, so in 2018 I joined their animation development team. Initially I looked at various prospective projects, but as I had previous experience in preschool television, *Pip and Posy* instinctively felt like a natural match. Together with a few final scripts, this set out our vision for the series which

met with a great response from the market. We were fortunate to get commissioned for 52 episodes by Milkshake, Sky Kids and ZDF. We are still writing the final scripts but have delivered the first batch of finished episodes for broadcast already. At the moment, we are at max capacity – we nearly have 100 people involved in this production.

Where is the animation produced? Which animation tools are used to produce it?

We did the original teaser with Blue Zoo animation studios. This was a great experience, as it quickly became clear to us they are a group of talented artists, who pride themselves in going beyond the expectations of preschool TV. They were the natural choice to produce the animation. We are working with Matt Tea as the series director, who has a great rapport with the whole team. The team at Blue Zoo is around 60 to 70 people strong. They use

PanelForge for boarding, which is a great tool to combine animatics and pre-vis in one. The actual animation and lighting is done in Maya, comp in Nuke and Redshift for rendering. Adobe is used for design and editing.

What makes this show stand out in the busy preschool landscape?

I personally like the naturalism of the series. Even if we have this talking bunny and mouse, I see them as real, engaging children. At every stage we have tried to reduce that cartoony and noisy elements you might normally associate with preschool TV. Instead, we have relied on the natural charm and humor that is part of real six-year olds' lives. Our main angle of the show is friendship: We only created stories that revolved around a friendship-conflict, and then explored how Pip and Posy – with empathy, humor, positivity and resilience – attempt to resolve this. We don't have adults in their world, so this means there's no one to wag a finger, explain what they should do and when to apologize. Pip and Posy need to find these things out for themselves.

This is Magic Light's first foray into the series landscape ... what do you like about working in this format?

I like that we have the scope of 52 episodes to explore who these characters are. We have the flexibility to expand their world, dig into the nature of their friendship, and then create a lot of fun story ideas to play that out. The series format is definitely more relentless than the half-hour specials I was used to before, primarily because I like to give it that same stamp of quality. A series feels more like jumping on a conveyor belt that needs to run at a fast pace and isn't allowed to stop at any time. But that's where the fun is as well. I'm always amazed about what we get done on a weekly basis.

What were your biggest challenges in getting this show of the ground?

Surprise, surprise: the COVID pandemic. We hadn't even been in production for three months when the first lockdown was called in the U.K. So, we all started working remotely. This had countless challenges. For instance, we were due to start recording voices without any access to facilities. We had to rely on our cast of children to record from home in makeshift duvet dens, whilst puppies were barking and parcels being delivered. It was an enjoyable chaos; we relied on their parents to install this professional sound equipment, the children's

unflappable enthusiasm and our voice director's boundless energy on Zoom to keep things on track. It's a testament to everyone's resilience that our duvet den recordings are of the best quality, and currently broadcast on TV.

What do you love about *Pip and Posy*?

I'm very proud of this show. I love the stories, the characters and the whole tactile look of it. It's such an inviting series, and has that irreverent, witty humor which makes it an enjoyable watch for preschoolers (and hopefully parents as well). What I love most is how an episode seems to get 'plussed' at every stage it goes through. We've had stories where we weren't sure if we hit an emotional beat correctly, and then the animation department knocked that out of the park. And episodes where we felt the pace dropped a little, the music score suddenly made you long for more. So far, we haven't had a single dull day ... every week something happens I'm really proud of.

Which animated show or movie had the biggest impact on you?

Slightly embarrassing perhaps, but it might be *Beauty and the Beast*. I loved animation since I was a child, but never really questioned it. So, this was probably the first animated movie that made me understand there was an industry behind these pretty drawings. I remember seeing one of those 'featurettes' before the actual movie and was blown away at the skill and diligence. So, when I went to see *Beauty and the Beast* in the cinema, I vividly remember looking at it more from a 'filmmaker' point of view, pointing out "multiplane!" at every opportunity.

What's your take on the children's animation scene in 2021?

I've got a sense it's a healthy time for animation. It definitely has proven itself as a solid industry in this difficult year we've had, having adapted easier to working remotely. Preschool animation by default has a target audience with an insatiable appetite. Ironically, it feels like there has been more appetite for new content than ever before. I hope that this thirst for content and the accessibility via new viewing platforms will result in a surge of quality, not just quantity. Our younger viewers deserve thoughtful, engaging, fun and intelligent programs, just like adults do.

What kind of advice can you offer newbies who want to get into the animation business?

My experience is that there is no clear path, and that you gradually venture towards the area you feel you can offer the most. And that might not be the field you originally set out for! I see the animation business as a very social industry. So, whenever possible, please don't fall for the trap of sitting quietly with your headphones on. I always think it's worth it to show more interest beyond the department you happen to find yourself in. Positivity and communication skills are very important in our industry, and I think that schools don't always focus enough on that. So, show interest in others and make sure they find you interesting. Be confident of the things you're good at, but never assume you're the best at it. ♦

Pip and Posy currently airs in the U.K. on Channel 5's Milkshake and will debut on Sky Kids on-demand service in May.



Friends For Life: Magic Light's latest production *Pip and Posy* is based on a series of popular books by Axel Scheffler.



Mixed-Media Mayhem

Ken Anderson talks about the fun and madness of bringing Liz Pichon's *Tom Gates* books to animated life.

When British author and illustrator Liz Pichon's first *Tom Gates* book was published 10 years ago, young readers couldn't get enough of its charming humor and its cheerful illustrations and games. This year, the multi-million-copy bestselling book series enters a new medium as a 20 x 11-minute mixed-media show titled *The Brilliant World of Tom Gates* hits the market. (It premiered on Sky's on-demand service Sky Kids in the U.K. and Ireland in January).

Produced by TG Entertainment and Screen Scotland, with animation provided by Wild Child Animation, the instantly likable show centers on Tom's crazy creative life at home and school as he runs rings around his parents and finds new and inventive ways to annoy his sisters. The voice cast includes actress Catherine Tate as Tom's long-suffering mom Rita, Mark Bonnar as his "beady-eyed" teacher and 10-year-old newcomer Logan Matthews in the title role.

As exec producer Ken Anderson explains, "Liz's books are written and illustrated in a very particular way, with all kinds of fun games, songs and activities mixed in with stories and random fun and funny characters. The prospect of trying to wrangle this type of storytelling and visuals into a conventional TV series didn't seem to be the way to go. So, we needed to do something different."



"I really love that we have created something which is totally complimentary to the spirit, values and character of the books — but at the same time we have created something unique and original in its own right."

— Exec producer Ken Anderson



After bringing award-winning writer Ben Ward (*Horrible Histories*) on board, the producers opted for a modular, magazine program that could be shown separately or combined together to create essentially any length of programming. "The final element was to try to

pull all these elements together into a coherent and watchable episode," says Anderson, who is also the founder of Scotland's Wild Child Animation studio. "An episode that had

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Michelle Obama and her co-stars teach kids about cooking and nutrition.



Palate Cleanser

Six Point Harness's creative director Musa Brooker gives us a taste of his delicious work on *Waffles + Mochi*.

Netflix's charming live-action puppet series *Waffles + Mochi* has been one of the unexpected delights of the spring season. Produced by showrunners Erika Thor-mahlen and Jeremy Konner, Tonia Davis, Priya Swaminathan and Barack and Michelle Obama, the 10 x 20-minute show features former First Lady Michelle Obama and two delightful puppet friends (named Waffles and Mochi) as they travel the world and teach young viewers about cooking and healthy eating. In addition to guest stars such as Samin Nosrat, José Andrés, Massimo Bottura and Preeti Mistry, the show features over a hundred animated segments, produced by L.A.'s Six Point Harness under the direction of the studio's creative director Musa Brooker.

A stop-motion animation veteran whose nu-

merous credits include shows such as *Robot Chicken*, *Tumble Leaf*, *SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Titan Maximum*, Brooker began work on the series in the fall of 2019. He says he was very pleased when producers Swaminathan and Konner contacted him to join the project. "I was excited when they reached out to me about the project," he recalls. "Separately, around the same time, I was also contacted by Six Point Harness as I knew the head of production Barbara Cim-ity, as we worked together at *Stoopid Buddy*."

Diversity Wins

Brooker says what was clear from the very beginning was that producers had a very definite idea about the role animation was going to play in the series. "They wanted to have ani-

mation integrated throughout the show, so we helped them develop the different styles and visuals they were looking for," he explains.

The director says he got his initial cues by attending the show's writers room. "Because none of the writers came from an animation background, I listened to what they were looking for and understood the genesis of their ideas," says Brooker. "We had a lot of different style references. There was a cool wall in the room of images and references that they loved, which looked like this giant mood board. We were able to work together to pull from a lot of visuals both from animation history and contemporary work. The producers wanted different visuals for the different segments – we were going for the feel of a collection from indie animators."

Brooker and his team of about 30 designers, animators and some freelance vendors worked on the show's animated segments for about a year. "We animated Mochi's mouth, and he's in every episode," he points out.

Other animated spots feature the "Taste Buds" who live inside Mochi's mouth. He notes, "I really enjoyed working on the Buds. We also did the 'pizzazz lines' (the on-screen painted lines) that play around with the live-action elements. There are these patches and animated transitions created for the end of the scenes. We used a variety of animation tools, from drawing and designing in Photoshop to animating in Harmony and Adobe Animate, and some After Effects for compositing."

Quick Adapters

Brooker, who has also been the creative director at Six Point Harness and is overseeing



Visual Treat: The team at Six Point Harness worked their magic on Mochi's mouth.



"To capture the different flavors of the places Waffles and Mochi visit, Higher Ground wanted us to capture different flavors of animation. The different styles of animation reflect the varied styles of food and nutrition found around the world, and it's been a great joy to work on a project designed to broaden both the minds and palates of young viewers."

— Animation director Musa Brooker

many of the studio's upcoming projects, says one of the challenges of the production was adapting to the pandemic shutdown in March. "It all happened relatively quickly. Our studio CEO Brendan [Burch] made the decision to have anyone who felt like working from home do so on a Friday, and on Monday, the whole city shut down. We didn't miss a beat. By Tuesday that week we were up and running. But there's something amazing about being with other artists in a studio. When you work from home, you have to set up Zoom meetings versus just walking over to someone's desk to share something."

The director says diving back to the world of 2D animation after years of working in stop-motion was also interesting. "So many of the same

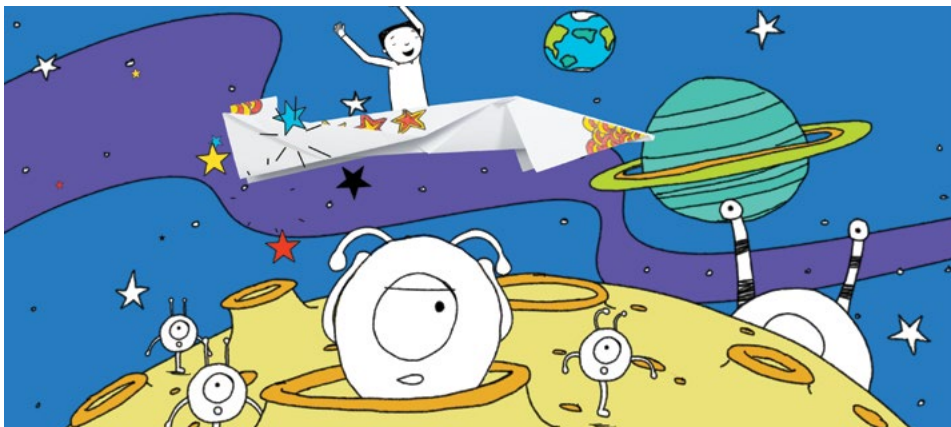
principles apply, so it was fun to go back to the world of 2D. Collaboration is always a challenge as you want to facilitate ideas and make sure everyone's ideas are heard. It's all about making something that is greater than any collaborator can do individually. It was exciting and meaningful to places where I hadn't gone before."

Of course, we had to find out what it was like to work with Michelle Obama. Unfortunately, Brooker said because he didn't interact with the puppets, he didn't get to meet the former First Lady in person. "I hope to meet her when we get a second season," he says laughing. "I love everything about this show. It was really exciting to be part of a project that is trying to do good and is thoughtful, entertaining and



fun to watch as well. For me, personally, it was a chance to return to 2D animation, which is where I first got my start. It is very rare when you get to work and play in all these different styles for the same project." ♦

You can watch *Waffles + Mochi* on Netflix. To find out more about Six Point Harness and its projects (which include *Cosmos: Possible Worlds*, *Season 2 of Lazor Wulf* and Amazon's *Guava Island*), visit sixpointharness.com.



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 42

never had a conventional script to work from but had the storyboarding talents of Amanda Aiken and her team to help guide the way. Constantly revising and adapting as the various segments dictated their own length and rhythm."

Making it Modular!

Anderson, an animation veteran whose credits include *64 Zoo Lane*, *The Imp*, *Wendy* and *Dennis and Gnasher*, says the biggest challenge was trying to work out the right format for the show. "Once we had cracked that and found a partner in Sky, who understood what we wanted to do, then it was mainly down to the creative/production challenges of wrangling everything," he notes. "That, of course,

was then completely turned on its head by the pandemic – but by that stage we had all bought into the idea and it was then a question of how do we make this work?!"

The show officially started production in March of 2020. About 50 people worked on the show, and the animation was done using Toon Boom and After Effects (for the motion graphics).

Anderson says one of the reasons the property has been so popular and timeless is that Pichon (who is also producing and appears on camera) constantly strives to make each book better than the last in some unique way. "She knows the world and the characters better than anyone else in the world and has to work hard to ensure that she keeps her top spot, as there are lots of kids who have immersed

themselves in the world and are little experts," he notes. "The character Tom Gates connects with children in a really wonderful way. He and his friends are all really lovely and funny – even the annoying ones! They enjoy being at school (mostly); they love their families – even if they can be challenging – and they have wonderful imaginations and the capacity to constantly make us smile and laugh."

Now that *Tom Gates* is beginning its small-screen adventures, Anderson says he's proud of what he and his team have delivered. "I really love that we have created something which is totally complimentary to the spirit, values and character of the books – but at the same time, we have created something unique and original in its own right," he admits. "We've created a whole new approach and had to problem solve, devise and work around all kinds of creative and production challenges, but we managed to deliver a series of episodes that kids seem to love and devour avidly. I love that we managed to bring together a disparate group of hugely talented people who've mostly never seen one another – except on a Zoom call – and make this amazing thing! In a pandemic, for Pete's sake!" ♦

***The Wonderful World of Tom Gates* is currently available on Sky Kids.**



The Sky's the Limit for Lemon Sky

The renowned Malaysian animation studio shares recent highlights and discusses the success of original IP, *AstroLOLogy*.

We recently had a chance to speak with Ken Foong, Chief Creative Officer at Lemon Sky Studios about the thriving animation studio in Kuala Lumpur. The Malaysian studio specializes in 3D character animation with a wide roster of clients who need high-quality animation and CGI for both long-form and short-form content as well as games. "We are a studio that is capable of adapting to a multitude of different art styles," says Foong. "As we deal with clients from all parts of the world especially the U.S. and Japan, it is crucial that we are versatile when it comes to the various directions that they are looking to execute. Since our inception, we have worked with clients from all around the globe including Nickelodeon, DreamWorks, Disney, Toei Animation, Nelvana and many more."

Lemon Sky currently has a team of about 350 people who work on both animation and game production. "From Line-producers to concept artists, 3D modelers, rigger, animators, vfx artists, lighting artists and technical artists, we have a team that specializes in every step of the animation production chain," notes Foong. "We

use a wide variety of tools depending on the project and the scope of work required. While softwares like Zbrush, Maya, Houdini FX, Adobe and real-time development platforms such as Unity and Unreal Engine are

commonly used in the studio, we also often work with our clients' proprietary engines or development platforms in order to fulfill the client's brief."





The Nickelodeon Connection

One of the studio's most recent projects is Nickelodeon's acclaimed preschool series *Santiago of the Seas*. "Niki Lopez's vision for the animated series was something we were excited to bring to life," says Foong. "The stakes were raised even further when we were hit with the global pandemic in the middle of production. The team made us proud though, pulling through with remarkable results."

As Lopez points out, "When the pandemic hit, we were in the middle of producing the series and were not sure how much it would impact the production. Lemon Sky Studios were quick to come through with solutions though. I love the way they worked with us throughout the process. The culture within that studio is so collaborative and energetic. They truly bumped up the quality tenfold."

Foong says the studio is also working on an animated comedy series for Netflix using Unreal Engine. "We get to play around with yet another style of animation art," he says. "We are also looking forward to working with DreamWorks on one of our most current projects."

According to the CCO, Lemon Sky is a studio that not only services the animation industry but also the world of video games. "We are honored to be able to work with big names in both industries. It is an extremely fortunate position to be in as we get to flex our creative muscles and we work on projects that cover all aspects of the creative industry. In addition to this, we have developed our very own IP and we are working towards developing our very own games as well."

Good Signs

One of the studio's hot new original shows is *AstroLOLogy*, a series that was

developed by

Lemon Sky Development (LSD), a division that was initiated to act as an incubator for new and exciting IP ideas. Foong explains, "After going through hundreds of ideas at our very first pitching session, we finally landed on *AstroLOLogy*. We saw a gap in content that was inspired by star signs and we decided to take a shot at it. This 288x-two-minute series is a slapstick, non-dialog comedy that allows us to tap into each sign's distinct characteristics."

Since its launch on YouTube, *AstroLOLogy* has accumulated 400 million views, reaching audiences worldwide. "We are happy to announce that we are close to reaching the 1 million subscriber mark," says Foong. "LSD actively compiles and assesses ideas for new IPs, and we have a few more in the pipeline for development."

So who is the perfect partner for Lemon Sky? Foong responds "I guess we look for partners who have the right chemistry, if I can call it that. Naturally, we want partners that are open to ideas, value art and can communicate well with us. More than that, though, we look for partners that can challenge us to be better. Allow us to try new art styles and work together to *make good art!*"



As one of the pioneers in the animation industry, Lemon Sky has witnessed the remarkable growth in the field over the past two decades. "Laying down the foundation is no easy feat," says Foong. "Along the way we have definitely encountered hurdles that we needed to overcome and we saw many other studios close down along the way. Twenty years later, we are grateful to have made it this far. It is wonderful to see so many passionate people in the industry that are working hard to make the industry stronger and better. While we have come a long way, we still have miles to go."

For more information, visit www.lemonskystudios.com

Fresh Market Fare

MIPTV may be virtual this year (April 12-16), but that hasn't stopped producers presenting fantastic new animated content to distributors and buyers all over the world. Here are several promising new toons that caught our attention. For more info about the online content event, visit www.miptv.com.

Tulipop



Package: Series 1: 26 x 7'; Series 2: 26 x 7'

Animation Type: 2D

Created by: Signý Kolbeinsdóttir

Produced by: Tulipop (Iceland)

Distributed by: Serious Lunch (U.K.)

Synopsis: Tulipop is a mystical island in the middle

of two seas and home to five very different, but equally loveable friends: Gloomy, a brave and adventurous mushroom girl; Bubble, her cautious, loyal brother; Fred a huggable Monster; Miss Maddy, a sassy monster bear, and the wise Mr. Tree. Growing up on an island where every day brings a surreal new adventure and nothing is quite what it seems can be challenging ... but life's small (or big) surprises are always more fun when you face them together.

Stand-Out Qualities: Magical modern day fairytales drawn from Icelandic folk stories but relatable to children everywhere.

Target Audience: Kids 4-6

Exec Quote: Helga Árnadóttir, CEO of Tulipop and the series producer, says, "Producing a high-quality TV series for global distribution has been our dream for years and we're so happy to be bringing it to life now in partnership with such a talented team. We are also delighted to have teamed up with Serious Lunch who really share our vision for the series and for how we intend to grow the IP in the years to come."

Delivery Date: Nov. 21 (episodes 1-13), June 22 (episodes 14-26)

Website: www.tulipop.com

Vee and the Golden Apple



Package: 13 x 2'

Animation Type: 2D

Created & Directed by: Dimitar Petro

Produced by: Dandeloo (France) and Studio Zmei (Bulgaria)

Target Audience:

Kids 8-12

Synopsis: An epic comedy-adventure series about a spirited teen (Vee) who uncovers her town's folkloric past and brings it roaring back to the present. But with the magic of old comes a primordial evil that threatens to destroy her home and all she's ever known.

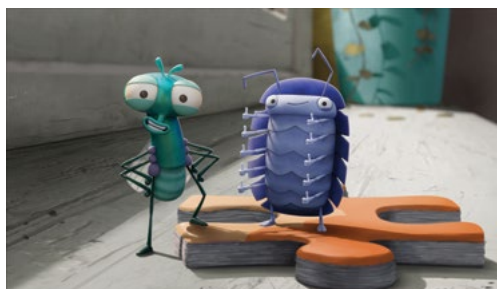
Stand-Out Qualities: The show is billed as the first animated series based on the rich and unknown universe of Balkan legends and folklore! The main characters, starting as modern teens in a seemingly modern town, discover their unknown heritage with the viewer, making this wild world easily accessible and understandable. Series offers a contemporary style and creative visual style heavy on VFX and epic creatures.

Exec Quote: "We fell in love with Zmei's project during Cartoon Forum because of the stunning design, beautiful animation and rich storyline potential. In fact, we first wanted to distribute the series worldwide, but it turned out that *Vee and the Golden Apple* was such a 'must-have' program that we decided to co-produce it as well. The team of talent we gathered into making this wonderful universe then become a reality," notes Emmanuèle Pétry Sirvin, Dandeloo partner and producer.

Delivery: Winter 2022 / Spring 2023

Website: www.dandeloo.com

Lloyd of the Flies



Package: 52 x 11'

Animation Type: CGI and 2D mix

Created by: Matthew Walker

Produced & Distributed by: Aardman

Synopsis: The adventures of

Lloyd B. Fly, a housefly and the middle child of 453. Lloyd lives with his parents, his little sister PB and their 225 maggot siblings inside a compost bin they call home. In the series, Lloyd and PB are often accompanied by Lloyd's best friend, Abacus Woodlouse, and eccentric tag-along, Cornea Butterfly. Together they explore the strange world beyond the compost bin, where there is no shortage of lessons for Lloyd to very nearly learn.

Stand-Out Qualities: The cross-generational appeal – it's a quality, character-driven, animated sitcom that will be enjoyed by the whole



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family. Produced also with the BFI's Diversity and Inclusion standards applied.

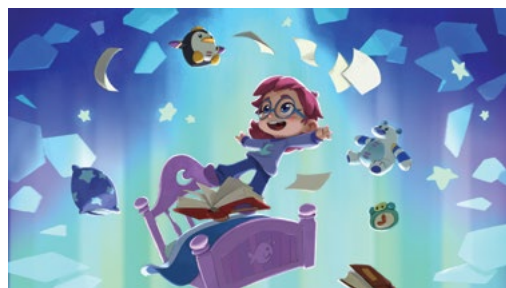
Target Audience: Primarily kids, but with strong co-viewing family appeal.

Exec Quote: "This is the first CGI series to be fully produced within the Aardman studio, and we're delighted with the positive response we've had from the market to the unique design and the impressive storytelling. It's exciting to be producing and distributing a series created by Mathew Walker, who is an exciting talent with a distinctive comedy outlook," says Alison Taylor, director of distribution and business development.

Delivery Date: Episodes 1-26: July 2022, Episodes 27-52: November 2022

Website: www.aardman.com

Abigail's Tales



Package: 52 x 11'
Animation Type: CG
Created & Produced by: One Animation
Synopsis: *Abigail's Tales* playfully re-imagines fairytales, giving the stories a modern

sensibility through the eyes of six-year-old Abigail. She isn't afraid to ask questions to find out more. With the unwavering support of her best friends, Boomer and Bing (a polar bear and penguin), they travel to the faraway worlds of fairy tales where they discover a whole new side to every story. Bringing classic fairy tales into a modern era with more relevant takeaways, and greater diversity and gender representation.

Stand-Out Qualities: *Abigail's Tales* encourages viewers to ask questions, seek information and learn there may be more to the story than first meets the eye. The show reimagines classic fairytales and brings the familiarity of parents' childhoods to today's children, with new twists and outcomes that are more relevant for our modern world. It also offers the opportunity to change the gender and ethnic representation of characters as they are traditionally portrayed in the classic tales.

Target Audience: Kids 4-6

Exec Quote: Michele Schofield, One Animation's senior VP of content distribution, notes, "*Abigail's Tales* is great for kids and parents alike, bringing brand new storytelling and surprising twists to classic fairytales. Abigail is an inquisitive puzzle-solver, serving as a positive role-model for preschoolers, reminding them to not judge a book by its cover and to see both sides of the story before rushing to judgment on the 'baddie' and 'goodie' of any situation."

Delivery Date: Late 2022

Website: www.oneanimation.com

Best & Bester

Package: 52 x 11'

Animation Type: 2D

Created by: Joonas Utti and Anttu Harlin

Produced by: Eye Present, Giggiebug Entertainment, Nelvana

Distributed by: Nelvana (international), excluding the U.K. (Eye



Present) and the Nordics (Giggiebug)

Synopsis: Best and Bester are siblings and best friends obsessed with comparing the best things of all time while enjoying the power to transform

themselves into anything they want, once a day – if only they can figure out what the best thing to be actually is!

Stand-Out Qualities: Series was pre-bought by Nickelodeon International early last year.

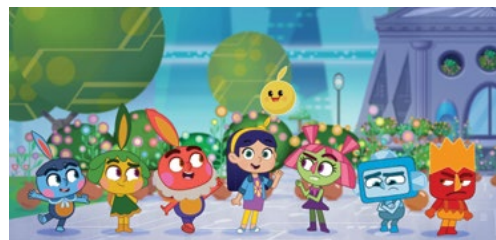
Target Audience: Kids 7-11

Exec Quote: "The world of *Best & Bester*, where anyone can be anything, gives our animators and composers endless opportunities and the creative freedom to let our imaginations soar," says Athena Georgaklis, Nelvana's head of development. "This series is a welcome addition to our production slate and we know audiences around the world will resonate with this ragtag group of friends as their hilarious hijinks lead them to learn about self-discovery, empathy, and embracing each other's differences."

Delivery Date: October 2022

Website: nelvana.com

Alva's World



Package: 52 x 11'

Animation Type: 2D

Created & Produced by: Kavaleer Productions

Distributed by: WildBrain

Synopsis: When

Alva isn't hanging out with her digitally connected family in real life, she loves to visit the magical land of Gizmo. Most of all, though, Alva loves visiting her friends, the Oolies – the cute elven race who live in Gizmo. Together, Alva and the Oolies have oodles of fun, but also solve problems and overcome obstacles, especially those created by mischievous Trolls.

Stand-Out Qualities: Via whimsical storytelling and magical tales, *Alva's World* explores themes that have been developed in conjunction with Cyber Safe Ireland and Crandall Consulting to teach kids about appropriate behavior online, including interaction, as well as preparing them for common childhood problems they may encounter through social media. The series tackles a number of key areas, from cyber-bullying and online gaming, to identity theft and current issues around COVID tracking and home learning.

Target Audience: Upper preschool to early elementary

Exec Quote: Caroline Tyre, VP of global sales and rights at WildBrain, notes, "*Alva's World* is the first series which aims to give kids a set of digital water wings to help them navigate the online world. Devised in collaboration with experts in this field, it's also packed full of captivating characters and whimsical storylines that inspire kids to prioritize kindness, fairness and creativity in all their interactions."

Delivery Date: Late 2021

Website: www.wildbrain.com

Galactic Agency



Package: 52 x 13'
Animation Type: 2D
Created by: Julie Chabrol
Produced by: Studio 100 Animation, Cosmos-Maya and Bardaf! Productions
Distributed by: APC Kids

Synopsis: *Galactic Agency* follows the adventures of a team of extreme repair specialists, featuring Dany the boss, K the hyperactive intern and the twins Apple and Zed. Aboard the Toaster, their hypersensitive spaceship, they will be called on crazy missions across the WashMash Galaxy to come to the rescue and to fix anything. From a diva-whale's washing machine to King Cheddar the Fifteenth's robot teddy, there's always something to do. But in this quirky universe filled with freaky creatures of all kinds, nothing ever goes as expected!

Stand-Out Qualities: A rich, quirky and fun universe that will delight the fans of cartoon series.

Target Audience: Kids 6-9

Exec Quote: "Galactic Agency is a fun, quirky and unique project that we are really looking forward to presenting to buyers at MIPTV," says Lionel Marty, managing director of APC Kids. "The hilarious characters and their wacky adventures are sure to capture the imaginations of young audiences around the world and provide a much-needed escape to outer space."

Delivery Date: 26 eps. by December 2021 / 26 eps. by June 2022

Website: www.aboutpremiumcontent.com

Paddles

Package: 52 x 11'



Animation Type: 3D CGI
Created and Produced by: FuturumKids
Distributed by: Neon (Korea), Monster Entertainment (global exc. Korea)
Synopsis: The

adventures of Paddles, a polar bear cub accidentally delivered by the Stork to a frozen River Shannon in Ireland – and brought up by a pack of Irish wolfhounds.

Stand-Out Qualities: Through the adventures, mistakes and discoveries of its funny and huggable star and his friends, *Paddles* shows its young audience that being different is something to be celebrated and enjoyed.

Target Audience: Kids 4-7

Exec Quote: "The tale of a young child trying to fit in in an unusual environment is a universal one and we are confident this funny and charming show will quickly gain fans in many markets worldwide," says Brendan Kelly, head of sales at FuturumKids.

Delivery Date: 2021/2022

Website: futurumkids.com

Dragon Lizzardo



Package: 26 x 11'
Produced by: Omens Studio
Created by: Ian Milne (*Monster Beach, Disney's Stitch & Ai*)
Exec produced by: Silas Hickey
Synopsis: The show follows bumbling squire Dragon Lizzardo as he accidentally

transports himself and his archenemy, queen-witch Helga, from their medieval dimension to the futuristic New Zap City. Now, Dragon must defend his new home from Helga, though his fun-loving fighting style is just as destructive.

Stand-out Qualities: This is a bouncy, extreme slapstick action-comedy with an anime twist. Great anime-inspired designs, entertaining storylines and eccentric characters will keep the older kids and tweens entertained. The show is written by Adam Moriano (*Big Mouth, SuperJail!*)

Target Audience: Kids 11-14

Website: www.omens-studios.com

Hero Elementary



Package: 40 x 22' or 80 x 11'
Animation Type: 2D
Created & Distributed by: Portfolio Entertainment
Produced by: Portfolio and Twin Cities PBS
Synopsis: Hero Elementary is

no ordinary school. It's where kids with superpowers learn how to use their unique gifts, and no aspiring superhero could dream of a more exciting place to train! The gym is a veritable obstacle course, festooned with a myriad of trapezes, hoops and boobytraps – and, of course, there is more high-tech gadgetry than any kid (superhero or not) could dream of.

Stand-Out Qualities: *Hero Elementary* is one of the world's first series for children to prominently feature a young autistic character in a lead role. The producers believe in the importance of representation in kids' TV, as the Hero Elementary team uses their "Super Powers of Science" to show audiences around the world that with determination and teamwork, anyone from any walk of life can contribute, have some fun and help save the day.

Target Audience: Kids 4-7

Exec Quote: Donnie MacIntyre, VP of sales and business development at Portfolio, says, "From the earliest stages of development, we knew we had something special on our hands with *Hero Elementary*, and I can confidently say it has exceeded our own wildest expectations. The incredibly talented creative team has built a world not only full of high-flying action and outrageous comedy that kids can appreciate, but they filled it with relatable characters in which the show's young global audiences can see themselves and their experiences reflected – albeit through a super powered lens! *Hero Elementary* has been a smash hit, selling into key territories around the world, and we can't wait to announce our next round of partnerships."

Delivery Date: Production completed 2021. Began airing on PBS Kids in June 2020

Website: portfolioentertainment.com ♦



Final Justice

Weta Digital's digital wizards discuss their work on the much-anticipated *Zack Snyder's Justice League*.

By Trevor Hogg

With the release of Zack Snyder's version of *Justice League* last month, the helmer got a second chance to complete his vision for *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* after studio politics and the death of his 20-year-old daughter resulted in his replacement by Joss Whedon in 2017.

Lackluster box-office results for the extensively reshot *Justice League* caused Warner Bros. to rethink its approach in bringing the DC Universe to the big screen. Rumors began to circulate online that a version existed which was overseen by Snyder, who through social media fuelled the frenzied fan desire for its release.

With the arrival of HBO Max, Warner Bros. took the unusual step of providing extra funds for the additional shooting and visual effects needed to make the 'Snyder Cut' a reality. Retitled *Zack Snyder's Justice League*, the four-hour event movie appears exclusively on HBO Max, with Weta Digital reuniting with production VFX supervisor John 'DJ' Des Jardin to produce

1,000 visual effects shots that involved updating shots and creating entirely new ones.

Second Chances

Animation supervisor Simeon Duncombe was part of the original Weta Digital team that worked on the 2017 version of the movie. "It's not often that you get a second chance at something, particularly like this," he tells *Animation Magazine*. "All of the cool stuff was coming back that you wished wasn't cut out in the first place."

Uploading assets from the original movie did not make the process any easier. "There is a scene where Steppenwolf is chasing all of the Amazons who are escaping with the Mother Box on horseback," states Weta Digital VFX supervisor Anders Langlands. "In 2017, they built what was needed to get the shots done. But then, we're coming in, designing new shots and pointing the camera in places that we never saw before. It was pitched to us as updating the characters, picking up a few shots, and finishing some shots; that com-

pletely undersells the amount of work that goes into something like this."

The hour's worth of material produced by Weta Digital includes redesigns of Steppenwolf and Darkseid – with the latter making his onscreen debut – as well as the expansion of the Nightmare sequence. "If you look at the end credit scene in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* where Lex Luthor is talking to a version of Steppenwolf; that is a design we reverted to in the 2020 version of *Justice League*," remarks Weta Digital VFX supervisor Kevin Smith. "For us, it was hitting the marks on executing the design as opposed to trying to develop anything new. Zack is a visual guy and he already had an idea of what he wanted all of his characters to look like."

A redesign request that proved challenging was increasing the iridescence of the armor worn by Steppenwolf. "What was interesting about that is Zack kept pushing for it to be more," reveals Langlands. "There was a certain point at which we stopped fighting it and embraced the disco version of him, which is cool!"



Monsters and Mayhem: Weta Digital delivered an hour of new visuals for Zack Snyder's *Justice League*, which includes redesigns of Steppenwolf as well as the expansion of the Nightmare sequence.



“What was interesting about [Steppenwolf’s iridescent armor] was that Zack kept pushing for it to be more. There was a certain point at which we stopped fighting it and embraced the disco version of him, which is cool!”

— VFX supervisor Anders Langlands

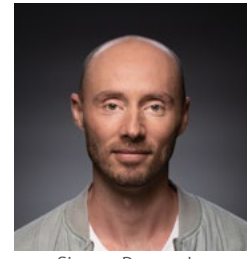
“My favorite moment with Darkseid occurs when he is at the end in the throne room,” remarks Smith. “Darkseid only has two lines but is such a compelling character. His lack of motion, stateliness and the way he looks at his subordinates and stares down Superman are what make his appearance in that sequence so great. For lighting, we tried to keep him bright enough to get enough light in his face so it reads, while letting him be dark and mysterious.”

The final performance comes down to the skill and experience of the facial animators. “The technology has not changed a lot from 2017,” notes Duncombe. “There were a lot of new lines and the only reference that we received were the actors holding up their iPhones.” The ability to do the necessary motion-capture performances was complicated by the coronavirus pandemic protocols. “We had a potential second lockdown coming

down the pipe, so you’re looking at potentially a month where you can’t get motion capture, which means you can’t build the shots. We had a particularly stressful few days where we were trying to capture as much performance as we could onstage.”

Fans will also notice that Green Lantern gets more screen time in this new edit. “He was killed early on [in 2017],” laughs Duncombe. “It was almost forgettable. There were maybe two shots. Originally, there were more shots of the Green Lantern, but they got omitted late in the game. That was another little moment which was cool to see come back. We decided to make that death more memorable this time around with the hand being cut off, the ring coming up and Darkseid potentially grabbing it. It was something that we came up with internally. That was good fun.”

The VFX team exercised much restraint when displaying the power of the Green Lan-



Simeon Duncombe

tern. “We intentionally kept it much simpler,” explains Langlands. “You only have a few shots to establish when you see a green beam that means Green Lantern is attacking

Darkseid. You can set up the conflict quickly rather than hope that the audience understands the green beam coming through is part of that character, not another one.”

Additional footage was shot for the sequence in which Bruce Wayne envisions an apocalyptic event occurring in the future. “Because of COVID-19, we couldn’t be there while they shot so we just got the plates,” explains Smith. “The nice thing about that is, from the way that Zack shot it was obvious where he wanted to go visually. It came down to us creating a believable environment and getting it behind all of the characters. Aside from the big establishers where you have spaceships and guys flying around, it is a character piece. This is about Batman’s interaction with the Joker, and we learn that some of the Justice League members are dead. The background becomes secondary to what’s actually happening with the dialogue.”

Man of Steel’s Double

Superman plays an important role in the new version as he turns against his fellow superheroes in the Justice League. “Superman is in two shots,” says Smith. “There is one that he’s far enough away that we used a digital double. However, the close-up of Henry Cavill is actually from *Batman v Superman*.”

“The biggest challenge was trying to find your own voice while still fitting into what was done before,” says Langlands. “I like the two big sequences that we did at Themyscira and the History Lesson; we were able to expand on those by bringing back some of the cool moments and creating some new ones. The sequences are a lot more fun and better developed than they were in the original film because there was more room for them to breathe.”

Smith says he enjoyed the idea of fulfilling the wishes of fans around the world. “It’s nice to work on a movie that so many people are looking forward to see: That’s the icing on the cake for this one. When the trailer dropped people were losing their minds. It’s nice to have a part in that.” ♦

Zack Snyder’s Justice League is currently streaming on HBO Max worldwide.

Tech Reviews

by Todd Sheridan Perry



Blender 2.91

Learning how to be a 3D artist involves understanding technique, workflow and best practices more than knowing specific programs. Sure, you can dive into Maya or Houdini or 3ds Max or Cinema 4D, etc. But as a budding artist, the cost of these programs may be out of your price range. This is where Blender comes in: It's robust, full-featured, is actually used in production and it's open source –

more robust by including collisions. Users already had ways to pull surfaces around to create wrinkles and buckling in cloth while retaining the surface area, but the collisions now allow one to drape cloth on characters.

There are also sophisticated FX with volumes where you can convert fluid volumes to meshes or vice-versa, meshes to volumes. And you can displace these volumes with procedural textures.

But try looking at Maya or Cinema 4D or 3ds Max tutorials and try to recreate them in Blender. By doing so, you are learning the techniques and methodology of working in 3D, and not just where the correct buttons are in the software.

Website: blender.org

Price: Free!

Foundry's Katana 4.0

Late last year, Foundry released the 4.0 version of its look development/scene assembly/lighting tool Katana. Within that release are some substantial improvements in workflow and efficiency, but none more important (in my opinion), than the UX for lighting artists.

The new Lighting Tools function within the Hydra viewport dramatically increased productivity for look development and lighting. Within the viewport, you get progressive render feedback as you make changes. This isn't anything new, but the way you make the changes is. Now, through click and gestures (which definitely is optimized for Wacom tablets), you can place and adjust lights. Clicking the surface of the model, you create a light based on how you want it to act on the surface at that point.

In the Katana 4.0 workflow, you click on the surface that you want illuminated – and that could be where you want the light, or a specular kick, or a reflection, or even how you want the shadow to land. Then, the light is created pointed at that spot. Through some modifier keys and pen gestures, you can move the light closer or further away, because as all cinematographers know, the proximity of the light is one factor for how bright it is, due to exponential falloff. Or, again with a gesture, scale the light up or down – which will modify the intensity *and* the softness of shadows.

You also have a floating interface within the Hydra Viewer of the most critical parameters of the light you have selected – or all the lights. There is a default set, but you can show more or fewer parameters if you want. The major point is that everything you need to make your lighting adjustments is right there at your fingertips.

Since progressive rendering is what this is all about – the fast iterative nature of lighting



which means it's totally free.

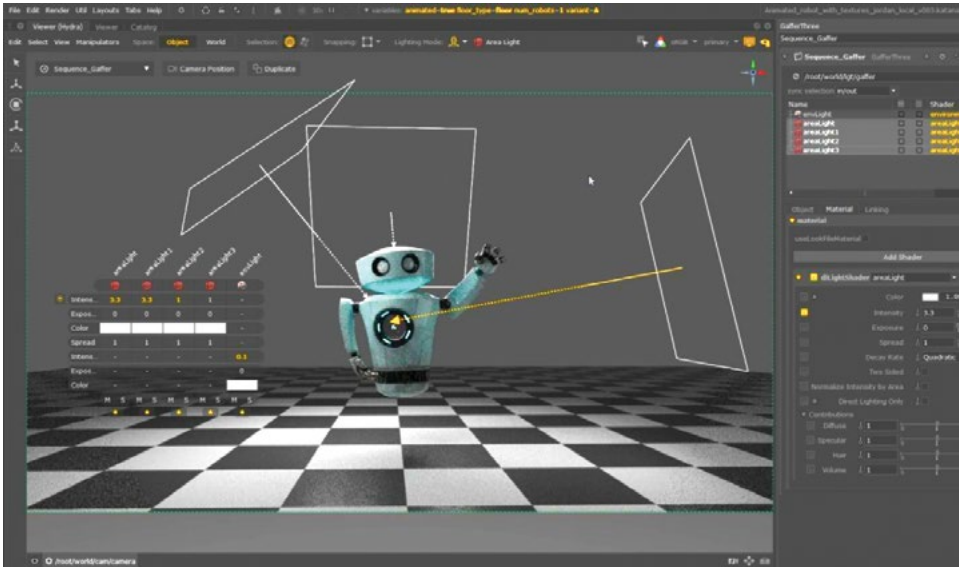
Blender 2.91 is the latest build – and frankly, I'm a little embarrassed that I haven't given it the attention that it deserves. The list of features is exhaustive, and ranges from modeling to sculpting to animation to cloth to volumes, to even things that other 3D programs have very little of: internal compositing, tracking, editing and 2D/3D hybrid drawing tools.

For me, a few of the brighter highlights in 2.91 are as follows: The Grease Pencil feature is designed to be for 2D animation, while existing in 3D space. The strokes become editable objects. And, traditional 2D tools like onion skinning provide a familiar workflow. New Grease Pencil features in 2.91 include the ability to import black and white images and convert them to Grease Pencil objects. Also, you can paint masks which will act as hold-outs between foreground and background animations.

Cloth tools had been introduced in earlier versions, but the developers have taken this feature further. Cloth sculpting has been made

The list goes on and on. But, despite the fact that a Blender review is long overdue, and I'm glossing over just how powerful the program is, my primary reason for bringing it up now – in an issue focused on education – is how accessible it is. Everyone with a computer can use it, which means everyone can learn 3D (and 2D) animation without the expense of a software license. While there are many offers of educational or indie licenses of competing 3D programs – \$750 can still be out of range for someone just starting out. Blender removes those limitations.

As a helpful hint that I frequently applied when I was first starting out, I would use tutorials from other software packages, and learn how to do them in the package I was using. For example: I had learned 3ds Max initially, so when Maya was released, I would use Max tutorials to force myself to rethink the approach and recreate it in Maya. Blender is as powerful as most other programs out there. There are hundreds of hours of training for it.



– Katana 4.0 can render multiple preview renders at the same time. So, you can launch a preview with parameters, the computer can chew on that image while you move on to make a new iteration. In earlier versions, you'd have to wait until that first image was done (or you cancelled it) before you began working again. This is optimized further through Katana Queue, where you can tap into a render farm for your preview renders as well as your own workstation.

There are many more advances in the way items are organized and displayed in the catalog, USD utilization, and how the network material nodes can be iterated, spawn children and shared with other artists. But it's the aforementioned workflow and UX changes for the artists that get me the most excited. I totally encourage the update because this version is pretty darn robust!

Website: foundry.com/products/katana
Pricing by request

Borix FX's Mocha Pro 2021

Last year, I was working on a project where I had to insert photos into a book where the pages were bending and distorting. It was a tracking nightmare where planar tracks weren't going to do it, and Nuke's vectors didn't work either because of reflections moving across the pages. I sure could have used Mocha Pro 2021 way back in 2020!

The latest Mocha Pro now has a mesh warp tracker, called PowerMesh, for those crazy situations as mentioned above. Also, my problem wasn't even as heinous as some. At least my photos were relatively stable – it wasn't like a tattoo on skin, or a logo on a t-shirt, or a rip in some blowing curtains. These are the situations where PowerMesh shines.

As a sub-process, PowerMesh works under-

neath the primary planar tracker for added efficiency as it utilizes the gross movement to drive the warp track. This makes it faster than transitional optical flow processes. Once planar tracked, you can choose between two approaches: automatic and uniform. Automatic mode analyzes areas of contrast to identify useful areas to track, while uniform mode creates a uniformly dense mesh over the entire surface. Further, you can control the mesh track points manually to inform Mocha Pro what you want tracked, and by adding points, you can add detail and density to the mesh. And because the mesh warp is calculated under the planar, you can use a smooth parameter to tell Mocha Pro how locked or loose you want the mesh warp in relation to the planar track.

The mesh warp data is not just for tracking stuff onto other things. It can also be used to assist in rotoscoping highly deformable objects as well as completely stabilizing the deformed surface to make patching and decaling much easier. And while all of this data (tracks and mattes) can be exported to host programs

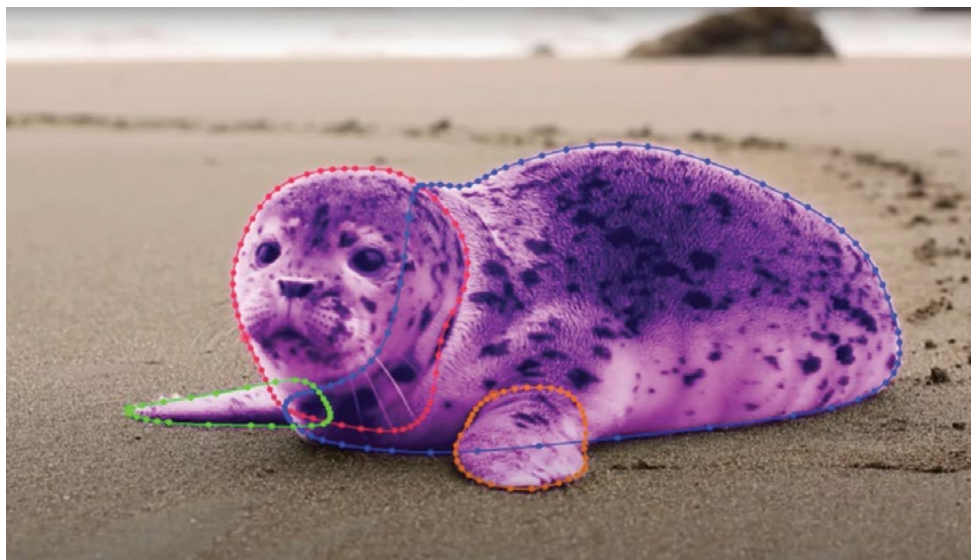
outside of Mocha Pro (as it always has), Borix FX has upped the ante by allowing you to export the mesh data into a 3D animated alembic file. The alembic file retains UV maps based on the frame you decide on, so your tracked element will stick to your footage as seen through the provided camera. This is extremely useful if you need to add fancy 3D things like new lighting or proper reflections.

I should also mention that Borix FX has bolstered the AdjustTrack features, to make fixing finicky, drifting tracks way easier. By adding a layer to the primary track, artists can make interpolated keyframes to shore up the track. But more important, you can add additional control points within the boundaries of the planar track to aid the points of the plane that might have gotten lost when it was occluded or lost in motion blur. Moving and nudging points creates adjustments to all points to keep things nice and smooth.

In addition, for the techy techs out there, Borix FX has brought over Python from the standalone Mocha Pro into the plugin version so that custom tools will be available to use or create from within the host software.

Website: borisfx.com/products/mocha-pro
Price: \$37 (per month), \$297 (per year)

Todd Sheridan Perry is an award-winning VFX supervisor and digital artist whose credits include *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and *The Christmas Chronicles*. You can reach him a todd@teaspoonvfx.com.





The Main Attractions: Animation festivals such as Annecy in France and Pixelatl in Mexico offer great opportunities for up-and-coming directors and producers to get the word out on their new projects.



The Path to Feature Filmdom

There are many paths to getting your very own feature film produced. From doing it all yourself to forming co-production partnerships to finding investors, the sky's the limit. And with the internet seemingly creating superstars overnight by the millions and with thousands of film festivals being held annually around the world, it would seem that the only thing you need to do to get discovered is to hit the film festival circuit or post your work on social media.

Or is it?

To Fest or Not to Fest?

The 'Film Festival Circuit' is a well-known and well-trod path that filmmakers from around the world tread in hopes of landing a production deal. However, with the exception of the top 10 or 15 film festivals (such as Cannes, American Film Market, etc.), other than the opportunity to fraternize with other hopeful filmmakers, you probably won't find that elusive production deal you were hoping for regardless of how eager film festivals are to dangle that hope in front of you.

There are somewhere between 3,000 – 5,000 film festivals today. Many of them serve as wonderful social gatherings where you can meet other aspiring filmmakers and enjoy watching and discussing tons of independent

projects.

On the other hand, if your goal is to sell your film, be discovered or get a distributor, the chances that someone from a film or distribution company who could make this happen is attending the very same film festival as you could be less than one in 1,000. Moreover, the chances of that person seeing your particular film is even less, and a yet further stretch that they will actually like your work enough to open up a dialogue with you. Your chances, at this point, are officially slim to none.

If your goal is to sell your film, be discovered or get a distributor, but you don't get your film into the top 10-15 film festivals, my suggestion would be to take all the time and money you would have spent attending dozens of lesser film festivals and reallocate those resources to reach out to film companies and distributors directly.

The Short Route?

Making a short is a great exercise in filmmaking, but rarely do they magically turn into feature length versions later. On occasion, this does happen, but if your interest in making a short is to somehow parlay that into a feature film later because you don't yet have the money or resources to make a feature, you would be better off focusing on producing a stellar

trailer, an in-depth look book and an air-tight business plan.

Protect Your IP

If you have produced a short or a trailer that you are excited about, it would behoove you to keep it under wraps until you're completely clear on your goals.

For example, if your goal is to let everyone on the web see your work for free, by all means, post it on social media, video sharing sites and every other webpage that will take it. If your short is really good (or really, really bad), chances are it will receive lots of free views. However, if your goal is to use your work as a stepping stone to produce a feature film, by no means should you send it out to the electric ether. To do this means you are essentially surrendering your work and ideas to any and everyone who may or may not have nefarious intentions.

Additionally, acquisition executives want to know that your project is fresh and new and hasn't been all over the world before landing in their lap. ♦



Martin Grebing is the president of Funnybone Animation Studios. He can be reached at funnyboneanimation.com.

What's it like to be a big-shot 3D animation director at the thriving **Omens Studios** (*Counting with Paula*, *Leo the Wildlife Ranger*) in Singapore? We asked **Sacha Goedegebure** to give us a peek into his life this month, and he was kind enough to invite us along!



1

Starting the day with a simple breakfast for me and my wife. Creatures of habit, we both always have the same thing each day.



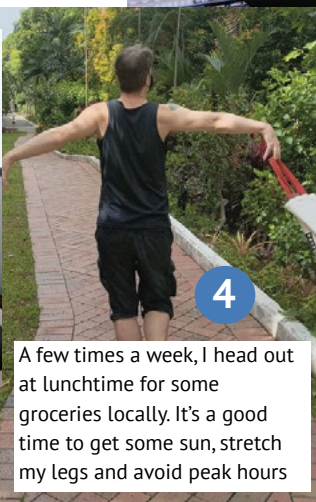
2

Work begins with some rendering for our new short film *Soft Rain* in Blender. It's a bit unusual to use my work PC for this and not the studio equipment, but hey, we're adapting to these unprecedented times.



3

Checking music and SFX for *Soft Rain* on SyncSketch. All audio for *Soft Rain* is created by composer Jan Morgenstern, who I met in 2007 (we both had thicker hair) when working on my first short film *Big Buck Bunny*.



4

A few times a week, I head out at lunchtime for some groceries locally. It's a good time to get some sun, stretch my legs and avoid peak hours



5

Pretty much all our meetings are on Zoom now, ranging from script development, thumbnail review to look dev or new IP development.



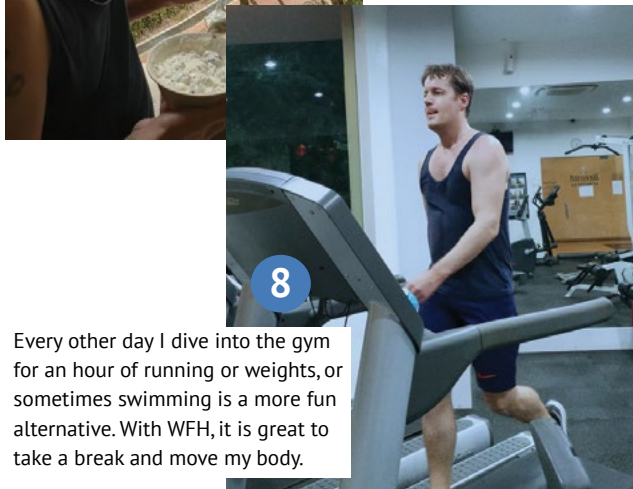
6

Dinner is always light: Today was Greek yogurt, muesli and grapes. Similar to lunch, dinner is a quick break. Occasionally I watch some *Star Trek TNG* during dinner break. Live long and prosper!



7

Occasionally I give myself a break from my daily tasks and create something in my go-to 3D software Blender. It's a good distraction and keeps my skills sharp, on both the visual and technical development side.



8

Every other day I dive into the gym for an hour of running or weights, or sometimes swimming is a more fun alternative. With WFH, it is great to take a break and move my body.



9

It's common to spend some late nights finishing my daily tasks. If all goes well, I can start chilling (i.e. watch Netflix) with my wife around 9:30 p.m. However, the biggest challenge of the day starts then: What are we going to watch?



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{ WINNER }
BEST ANIMATED FILM
LOS ANGELES FILM
CRITICS ASSOCIATION

{ WINNER }
BEST ANIMATED FILM
THE CHICAGO FILM
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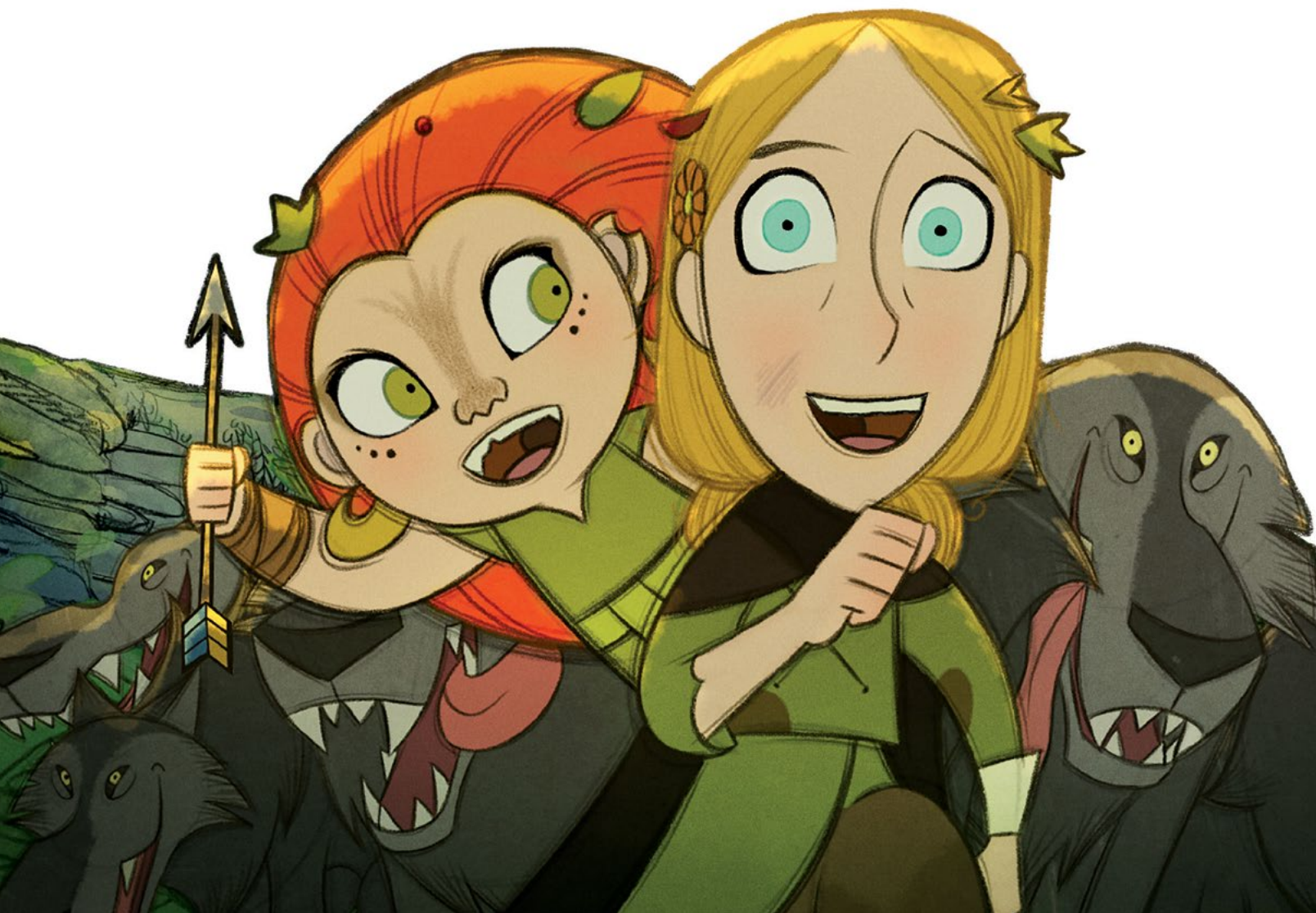
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FEATURE

BEST STORYBOARDING
FEATURE

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“DAZZLING”

THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER



An Apple Original Film

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Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13